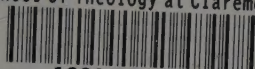


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PARABLES OF JESUS





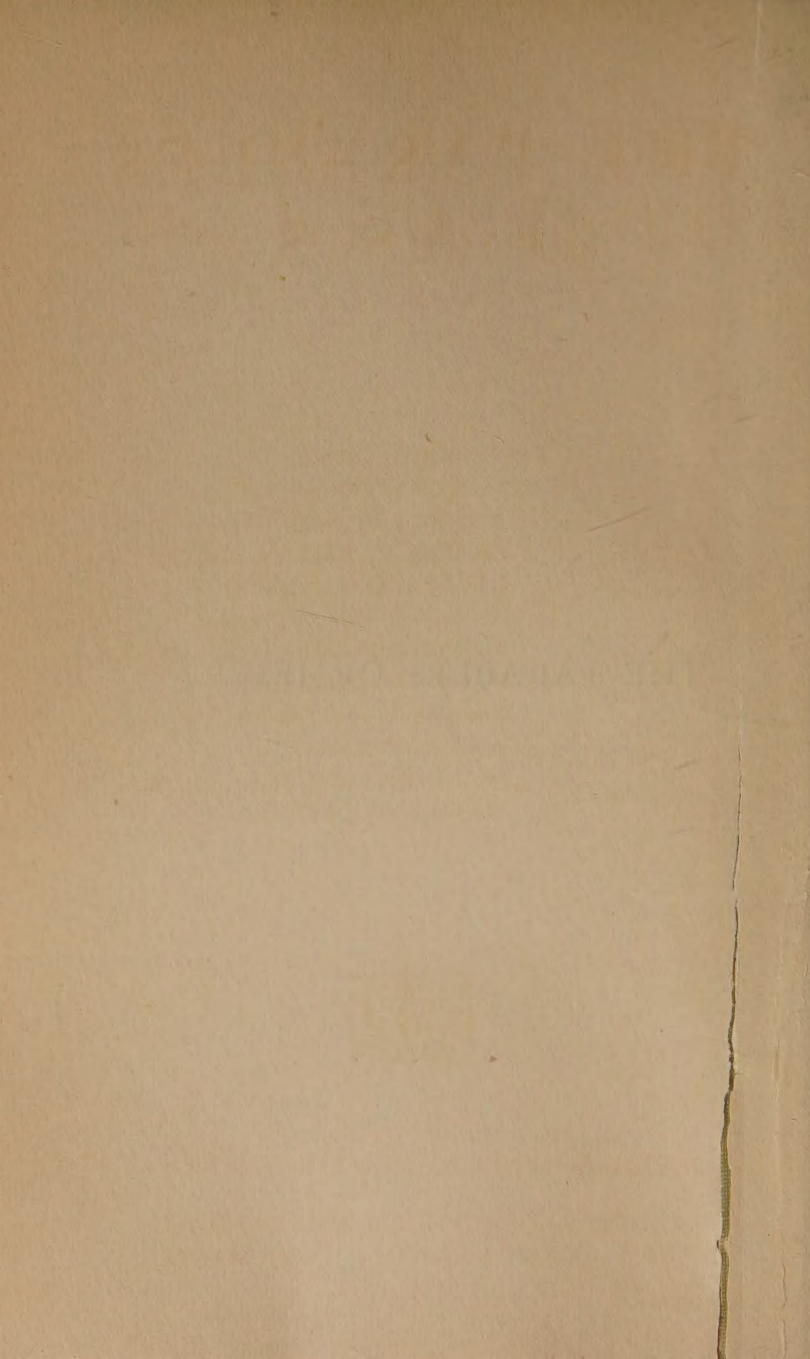
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THE PARABLES OF JESUS



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John Atwood

THE PARABLES OF JESUS

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TEACHING BY PARABLES

BY REV. GEORGE H. MORRISON, M.A.

TEACHING BY PARABLES

“Therefore speak I to them in parables : because they seeing see not ; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.”—MATTHEW xiii. 13.

THERE is a tone of surprise in the preceding question of the disciples. We gather that the twelve were in perplexity. There had come a change over the Master's teaching, and they were quite at a loss to understand it. At first the words of their Lord had been direct. He had preached in such a plain and powerful way, that men had marvelled at His words of grace. But of late He had taken to another method, and the disciples were staggered at the change. They were so anxious for their Master's influence. They were so keen to have His teaching popular. They were so frightened lest this change of form should irritate or alienate the folk. It was not at all an idle curiosity, but a real concern for their beloved Lord, that made them ask, “Why speakest Thou in parables ?”

The parable, then, was not Christ's way at first. It was after He had been teaching for some time that He adopted this method of instruction. And

it argues the true humility of Jesus that He should condescend to change His ways. There are men who boast that they have never changed. They seem to confuse consistency with character : they seem to forget that some kinds of consistency are really begotten of pride and not of principle. There is an inconsistency that is divine when it springs from expanding hopes of doing good. There are changes of method that are but the index of the passionate craving for a larger service. And when a man or when a Church grows stereotyped, and will not alter for an altered need, it has wandered far from the footsteps of the Master. Let us be quick to feel a changed environment. "Let the dead bury their dead : follow thou Me."

Our Lord, then, as His ministry advanced, altered His method and made use of parables. And I want to try to understand some of His reasons for that change of form. In other words, why was Jesus attracted to the parable ? What was the charm of the parable for Christ ? God grant that we may find it helpful to give our thought for a little to that.

I.

Well, first, it is a feature of the parable that it makes a powerful appeal to memory.

We all know how things that we have seen make a deeper impression on us than things we have only heard. The sentinels are half asleep at ear-gate, but at eye-gate they are ever on the watch. We read of storms and battles in the newspaper, and by to-morrow they seem far away ; but had we seen the ravage of the storm, or watched the swaying of the tide of battle, I think it would have taken many a year to blot out the remembrance of the scene. I got some time ago from one of the privates of the Gordon Highlanders a copy of the Brigade Orders for his camp, and it told how, in the South African War, the Brigade had fought in thirty-seven actions. Now, doubtless, when the news was flashed from Africa, we all read of these thirty-seven battles ; but to-day the closest student of the war could hardly give me the names of ten of them. But our Highland friend is home from the war now, and many a night, by his humble hearth, he tells his adventures to his wife and children. And I warrant you *he* has not forgotten the name of one of the thirty-seven actions. They are fresh in his memory because he saw them all.

And when we rise a little, to abstract truths, we find the same great principle at work. Truths are

almost powerless in common life till men have seen them and till the mind has pictured them. It is no fancy that talks of grasping truth. Till truth is grasped it is not really ours. It was what their hands had handled and their eyes had seen, that became the power of life to the apostles. How utterly inconceivable were death, if we had never seen a person dead. How little we should know of truth or bravery, had we never met a brave or truthful man. The world is not inspired by abstract virtue. We do not advance in the power of bloodless terms. Ideas must be clothed, great truths must be embodied, and principles somehow must be pictured out, if they are ever to catch the people's memory, and enter with power into the people's heart.

And that was the charm of the parable to Jesus. That was one secret of its appeal to Christ. The people saw the picture in a flash, and what they had seen they would not soon forget. Had they forgotten it, then all was lost, for our Master never wrote one single line; and you never heard of a disciple's note-book in which he jotted at night what he had heard by day. Christ had one book—it was the people's memory. He had one tablet—it was His hearer's heart. And hence the charm to Jesus of the parable, for it wrote itself indelibly there. He might have preached for many an hour on pardon, and by to-morrow it would have been forgotten. But the storms and worries of twice

twenty years would never efface the story of the prodigal. He might have unlocked the mysteries of prayer, and the rude crowd would have wondered and forgotten. But they never forgot about the friend at midnight, beating and begging at his neighbour's door. And who would have carried the Kingdom in his mind if Jesus had openly declared its nature? But they never saw a mustard seed again without some remembrance of the teaching of the Lord. It was because He cast Himself upon the people's memory, that the parable first attracted Jesus.

II.

Again, the parable sets a new value on the truth by making men take pains to find it out.

It is the things which cost us pains that we prize. We lightly value what we lightly get. A little effort—a little toil and sweat—and the gain is doubly precious in our eyes. It was not till the disciples had toiled all night, that Jesus gave the miraculous draught of fishes. It was not till they had rowed their very best, that they saw their Master walking on the sea. Christ knew the double value of a gift when something of earnest effort went before it. I am sure, too, we have all been struck by this. We have read, let us say, the lives of great reformers, and we have

found how they were stirred and strengthened by one truth. And that same truth is yours and mine to-day, and yet for us it seems a commonplace. Take, for example, justification by faith—that strong, deep truth that runs through the New Testament. How little it means for multitudes to-day; what a dead sound the very words have got. Yet when I read the story of Martin Luther—it was by that truth that he shook the world. We get it lightly, and we treat it lightly. We drank in its meaning with our mother's milk. But Luther struggled for it through the dark, and wrestled his way to it through tears and blood, until, through all the groping and the pain, it shone in the heart of Luther like a star. That, then, was another attraction of the parable for Christ. For the parable not only pictures truth, the parable half conceals the truth it carries. A man must go home and think for himself a little, if he would reach the drift of Jesus' words. And so the parables sorted out the hearers. The parable was a judgment in disguise. It hid God's mysteries from idle loungers, but it made them doubly precious to the earnest. The parable was a savour of death unto the dead, but a savour of life to every seeking soul that sought for its meaning as for hidden treasure.

And I believe, brethren, that in all Christian preaching God means that there should be that two-fold function. Every true sermon, like every parable, is very truly a judgment in disguise. There is a

healthy scorn in Presbyterian Scotland against what is sometimes known as easy preaching ; and I trust the hour is yet far distant when that fine scorn shall have quite passed away. True preaching is not something to enjoy. That is the outlook of a sensuous age. True preaching is for a man to wrestle with, to grasp and grapple with every power of soul, until he is ennobled by the effort, and the little truth he wins is doubly dear. Be on your guard against sweet and easy preaching. It is not that which has made this nation strong. You must take pains to hear. You must give heart and brain. Whether in life, or in listening to a sermon, God helps those who help themselves.

III.

Once more, there is a witness in the parable to the harmony between the seen and the unseen.

You have all noticed one feature of our speech. We constantly describe things we cannot see under the figures of things we see and touch. We say, for instance, that a heartless man is cold, though his temperature be just the same as yours or mine ; and the successful man is rising in the world, though all his days are spent at the sea-level. We talk of the dawn and opening day of

youth, though the youth has as many sunsets as the aged. And we say that the profligate is galloping downhill, though perhaps he was never on horseback in his life. In all these cases we describe the inward, in terms and figures borrowed from the outward. And the question I want you to ask yourselves is this : Are these resemblances poetry or fact ? In other words, is it a happy accident that we can describe the unseen by the seen ? or is there a real tie between the two, so that the one is truly the image of the other ?

Take these two thoughts as helping to an answer. First, these resemblances are universal. You may search through all the literatures of the world, and you will never find a generous man called cold. No Greek or Roman, no Persian or Indian, would speak of the profligate as galloping uphill. Go where you will, these common things we see are used to describe the same invisible truths : and that all that should be a happy accident, it is impossible, surely, to believe. Some hidden tie there must be, some real and secret bond between the seen and the unseen world, to explain the constant occurrence of such speech.

And then, remember, what is this outward world ? It is an expression of the thought of God. The stars, the sun, the seas, the plains, the hills, all these were first a thought of the Almighty. Now, your thoughts and mine are often contradictory ; but the thoughts of the infinite God are never so. It is in

the harmony of all His thousand thoughts that the eternal peace of the Almighty lies. Truth, then, and purity and peace and love, and stars and sun and moon and seas and hills, all equally are thoughts of the one mind. It is no idle poetry, then, that finds in the one, types or figures or emblems of the other. The outward is the image of the inward, and the hidden union is the thought of God.

Now, brethren, it is that truth, deep sunk into the mind of Jesus, that gives the richest meaning to the parables. Christ did not catch at any stray resemblance and say that the kingdom of heaven was like *that*. But as truly as a man's love or anger glances or flashes in his eye, so truly in the mustard seed or leaven there shone the likeness of the invisible world. That they were like was no happy coincidence. There was one thought of God inspiring both. And it was because Christ felt that underlying likeness as it was never felt before or since, that He delighted to employ the parable. It is His witness to the perfect harmony that binds the unseen and the seen together. It is His glad acknowledgment that through all realms runs like a golden thread His Father's thought. The parables of Christ are not coincidences. The likenesses they discover are Divine.

Such, then, were some of the attractions of the parable. Such thoughts help to explain the charm they evidently had for Jesus Christ. They made a powerful appeal to people's memories. They sifted

out the hearers of the Word. They rested and rooted in the glorious truth that the thoughts of God interpret one another. Come, then, and out of that scattered doctrine take two simple lessons.

First, then, however plain the teaching of Jesus seem, it is only by taking pains we master it. I have heard a man say that in the Gospel of St. John there was much that he could never understand. But the parables—they were all plain to him; and so he never tired of reading the parables. But sometimes the very plainness of the parables proved fatal. Men caught the story but they missed the truth. And from the verses that follow our text we see that Jesus was alive to that. Remember that in the plainest discourse there is a call for effort and a call for prayer. It were better never to enter the house of God than to sit there in a dead and stony way. No problem of politics calls for such keen attention as the plainest word for God and for the soul. And the glad message of a risen Saviour shall only add to the darkness and the doom, if it fall on listless and inattentive hearts. We must be roused, and we must be stirred to hear. God keep our people from the sleepy heart! We grow by effort, we advance by toil; and the night cometh when no man can work.

And the other lesson we must learn is this: if we have the mind of Christ who spoke the parables, then all the world will speak to us of God. I was standing the other evening in a wayside station

when the moon was rising in splendour through the clouds. She was still hidden behind a heavy bank, but her light was flooding upward to the zenith. One would have thought that all that silvered glory would have stirred some chord of heaven in the dead. And two men were standing near, and one called the attention of the other to the sky; and the other looked at it, and then he said, "Ah, man, isn't it like the footlights?" Poor barren soul! who in all the splendours of the starry sky saw only a cheap resemblance to some theatre. It is such utterances that betray the thoughtless. To the Christ-touched heart the whole world speaks of God, and of the human soul, and of the moral struggle; till night, and morning, and everything we see, declare the things that are invisible. It is thus that we must use the world. It is that suggestiveness which is crowned in the parables. We miss the moral value of Creation, till we have seen it with the eye of Christ.

THE CHOKING THORN

BY REV. J. G. GREENHOUGH, M.A.

THE CHOKING THORN

“He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word ; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful.”—MATTHEW xiii. 22.

IF we could read Nature as Jesus Christ read it we should never look on a garden or walk through a field without picking up a living sermon and receiving a message from our heavenly Father. The commonest things spoke to Him great and elevated truths. He saw heaven mirrored in a flower, and heard celestial music in the twitter of a bird. Being Himself Divine, He discerned a certain Divine meaning everywhere. The earth was covered with the footprints of the Creator ; all things were bathed in the pure light which shone forth from His own soul. The dullest objects were clear enough in His eyes to reflect some thought of God ; the most insignificant things were grand enough to point, like cathedral spires, heavenward. Would that it were given to us to read all things with the mind of Jesus, and to find in all the common paths of life suggestions of the Divine.

Here we have one of His loveliest sermons preached with a corn-field as His text—a corn-field and a sower. This is one of the best known of His parables. We have taken this figure of the sower from Him and applied it in a hundred ways. We call our schools seminaries, or seed-sowing places. We speak of disseminating the truth, which is only another word for sowing it. We talk of those who sow righteousness, and of those, alas ! who sow wild oats. We are constantly reminded by our favourite writers that every act we do is a seed-grain which will yield its good or evil fruit in years to come. All these things have we got from that well-remembered parable of our Lord. Now, what He teaches us here is that His own living words are to the human heart what the living seed is to the soil. The soil can produce nothing until the seed is dropped into it. However rich the soil, it is dead and unproductive until the Divine seed is given to it. And yet the seed itself is dependent upon the quality of the soil. And the very best seed may be starved or choked if it falls in places where rock and thorns and hard-baked paths refuse it entrance or deny it nourishment. The sower may always calculate on some loss, some wasted grain, and should be thankful if the greater part yield him a return. In this way our Lord thought of Himself and His heavenly teachings, and of all who should hereafter make those teachings known. They would spend some of their strength for nought. Their message

would not always sink deep and take root, and even when it did fasten itself in the heart and grow, it would sometimes stop short of the fruit-bearing stage. Three instances does He give of unproductive sowing.

There are some on whom religious truth makes no impression. It falls on idle ears and unreceptive hearts. These hearts are like the trodden wayside, hardened and made impenetrable, so that the seed simply touches the surface and never finds its way within. There are others on whom it makes a prompt and instantaneous impression. They seize it with a flush of surprise, with a cry of joy ; they are charmed with its loveliness. For a while it is all in all to them. But they are shallow natures. They are like the thin soil sprinkled over the hard rock, and nothing takes deep root. They are fickle, whimsical, inconstant, ever deserting some old love for the new, forsaking the enthusiasm of yesterday for the passion of to-day, following religion, as they follow everything else, only so long as its novelty lasts, only until some new and dearer thing attracts their wandering affections. Then comes the third class, in whom the truth, though not quite lost and wasted, still fails to bring forth the hoped-for fruit. They are neither hard and unreceptive, nor weak and inconstant. They are strong, rich natures in whom the living seed obtains a sure hold for a while and takes deep root. They begin the religious life carefully, thoughtfully, intelligently, with true and

firm purpose, and all their thought and actions are for a time moulded, enriched, and elevated by its Divine impulses. Then comes their struggle with the world, and the long, daily-repeated trial of their faith ; not that their faith is tried by persecution, or obloquy, or suffering for righteousness' sake—they simply meet with a number of counter attractions which bid for their thoughts and interests, and slowly occupy the place which has been filled with higher and holier things. There spring up in them desires and ambitions which in their first sweet religious hours had slumbered and made no sign, there is an accumulation of cares and worldly anxieties and eager quests and keen striving for wealth and social distinction which more and more each day absorb the mind and heart until the old religious love is almost, if not altogether, forgotten, and the old religious pursuits have ceased to interest. Then the early vows and profession, if not disowned, are simply shelved, and that which was once the dearest thing of all has fallen back into the third or fifth or twentieth place in life's aims and hopes. That is the seed which falls among thorns.

Rarely does the good seed fall on soil in which there are no thorns. The ordinary sower knows that his field is never quite free from weeds ; the winds of the previous autumn brought many ill weeds which lie hidden in his field, and spite of all his care will spring up with the good grain. The religious nature is never wholly religious. In the

best and bravest hours of our young and pure enthusiasm, when Christ seems all in all, this world has still a hold upon us, though we hardly feel it. Hidden thorn-roots are slumbering in the soil. We can hardly believe it when our religious life is in its first full gladness and earnestness. It seems as if all coarse ambitions and sordid desires had died out and would never have place in us again. Yet there are always hidden thorn-roots where the good seed falls. The soul to which Jesus gives Himself is not yet sanctified. Other sowers have been at work before *He* comes, and their seeds remain : the religious life is a new thing growing in an old world. Our old affections and ambitions and selfish passions and envyings are not extinguished and slain for ever when the Divine life settles down upon our souls. They shrink away and hide themselves for a time, conquered by the overwhelming force of a nobler and diviner power. But they cling hard, and reappear and endeavour to reassert themselves whenever the first love cools down and vigilance neglects its caution, and the novel beauty of the religious life has assumed a worn and familiar face. The thorns are there, not dead but hidden, growing secretly and waiting for their time to spring up and perhaps choke the heavenly seed. This is the common story of religious declension.

Take the men and women who were brought up in religious homes, who learned in their younger days to love the Bible, to love the sanctuary, to give

themselves up to the blessed life. They were once most truly devoted to Jesus, and in downright earnest about religious things. Nothing delighted them so much as Christian work. Now you can see that they have fallen from all that. Other things have swallowed up or crowded out their religious interests. Something has arrested and choked their Godward thoughts and strivings. Rarely or never do you see them in the sanctuary, and they have forgotten how to pray. They have slowly let go all that was once dearest and most sacred, and they belong to what we call "the world"; or perhaps they still hold on to their religious profession, but in a quite formal, heartless, and perfunctory way. Their souls are not in it, their strongest sympathies are not in it. Their dominant desires and ambitions have gone after other things. Whence comes this degeneration? Not always in one way. Manifold are the causes of religious declension. Some have been driven into unbelief by their troubles and hardships and disappointments; and some have gone intellectually wrong. They have yielded to the crafty persuasions and subtle arguments of sceptics. Yet these are but a small minority of religious backsliders. There are few who leave our churches because they have deliberately rejected Christianity; and perhaps fewer still who fall from their love of Jesus and their early fervour into unrighteous and immoral ways. There are some, but not many. I have rarely had the painful duty

of excluding a member from the Church for either manifest infidelity or open immorality. Christian men do not often go over to the devil, but alas ! they often go over to the world. They fall from the beautiful life of faith and devotion simply because the cares of this world gradually absorb their best thoughts and energies, and nearly *all* their thoughts and energies ; and the keenness and severity of life's competitions have made them fling themselves into the strife, body, soul, and spirit, to the neglect and forgetfulness of everything else ; and religious thought almost vanishes, crowded out in the stress of other affairs—the love of money, the love of the world's diversions, the love of notoriety and distinction, predominate and occupy all the ground. There are scores of men and women who are not willing quite to give up their religious profession ; yet they are most anxious to live as near as possible to the vortex and whirlpool of society's giddy pleasures and entertainments, and to be as much one with the world as they can be without being absolutely unchristian and unfaithful. And there are scores of men whose main ambitions run after the reputations of this life, after civic honours and leading places in secular affairs, and who get so full of these things that the religious element in them, though it is never denied, though no one is uncharitable enough to call it in question, simply falls into the far background and is left to take care of itself.

These, my brethren, are our dangers and our temptations. There is, perhaps, little need to warn you against really dishonourable and unrighteous things, against the sins which would bring a scandal and disgrace upon the Christian name. You are not much tempted by those things. Your temptation is to let the things of this sensuous and material world, the things of the lower world, assume such importance in your desires and imaginations and daily pursuits that the spiritual and the Divine things become of comparative insignificance. The empty and fickle glories of the present may hide from you the glory of the eternal, and the deceitfulness of riches and pleasures may seduce your hearts almost entirely away from the sweet, pure love of Him whom you now call Master.

Oh, my friends, do not be always asking what things are right and allowable and consistent with the Christian profession, what pleasures are innocent, what gains are defensible, what ambitions are honourable and allowable, what things you may engage in without forfeiting the Christian name. Do not be always trying to find out how near you can drive to the edge without falling over. But ask rather, are you giving yourselves up to those things in such a way and to such an extent that your allegiance to Jesus is plainly getting weakened and your interest in higher things losing its zest and joyousness and happy fervour?

Ah, yes, that is the question. Not, are we doing

anything that is positively forbidden, but are our lives sinking down to a lower level, to a vulgar atmosphere, to a world of coarse desires and petty aims, in which visions of the King are rarely seen, and from which heaven is very far away? Are we letting the thorns spring up and choke the good seed of the kingdom? Let us put that question to ourselves every time that we meet to renew our vows at Jesus' feet; and as we look into His face and receive again the assurance of His love may we have also the assurance given to us that none of the charms and seductions of an enticing world shall ever draw our hearts away from Him.

THE SEED IN STONY PLACES

BY REV. J. G. GREENHOUGH, M.A.

THE SEED IN STONY PLACES

“ They on the rock are they, which, when they hear, receive the word with joy ; and these have no root, which for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away.”—LUKE viii. 13.

EVERY one who does a bit of gardening finds the interpretation of this parable brought home to him in a practical way. In the same rood of ground, and almost in the same half a dozen square yards of soil, he sees all these differences which our Lord noticed : the seed by the wayside, the seed among thorns, the seed on stony ground, and the seed on good soil. In digging along one row you turn over varying depths of mould. Here your spade strikes stone before its blade is half down, and it can get no further ; there you bury it completely, and still there is soft, rich loam underneath. And as you watch the seed come up you give, of course, a kindly welcome to the first green shoots, but after a little experience you learn to distrust these early comers. They have grown too quickly, not because there is more vigorous life in them—no ! but because they have fallen on thin soil with stones underneath, and they shoot up at once because they cannot strike

down. On deep soil the seed makes for the depth before it struggles up towards the light. It plants its roots below, where the moisture lies, and though it is later in coming, it comes up with well-nourished strength, and abides. That other seed which has been so prompt to appear has its roots far too near the surface ; there is no under-moisture from which it can draw, and in the heat of the sun it dries up and withers away.

And all this, as our Lord has shown us, is an analogy or pattern of moral and religious things. There also there is often rapid growth with no root and no depth, and therefore no continuing power. There is a fair look of promise at the first, but nothing to sustain it, no reserve strength, no hidden wells of refreshment to fall back upon when the need comes, and the result is weakness, disappointment, falling away. "They on the rock are they, which, when they hear, receive the word with joy ; and these have no root, which for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away." This text reminds us generally of—

I.

The precocity of shallowness.

There are few things that spring up quickly if they have any depth. The child that is clever

beyond its years sometimes makes an extraordinarily clever man—*sometimes*, not often. The blossom that comes out in March bears no fruit in autumn. You need not be ambitious to see your children displaying genius in their teens. If the real fire burns there it will burn a long time unseen before it throws out its glittering sparks. A youth who poses as a Solomon and talks as if there were few things he does not know will rarely develop into a man of power. Self-conceit always grows on a thin soil. It is the little knowledge that struts about as omniscient. The boy who is too knowing to be taught and too self-important to be corrected at eighteen is always a fool at forty, and if he is a fool at that age he never becomes anything else. Where there is a little depth there will always be a little hesitation and a little modesty, and the power which carries a man through life and increases with his years will not be in a hurry to reveal itself. Most young men are ambitious to be fluent speakers. It is a very laudable ambition if the fluency is accompanied by thoughtfulness and common sense. But a man never learns to speak forcibly in a hurry. It is easy enough to talk without stammering, and to rattle off words without breaking down. It is easy enough to repeat phrases which you have learned, to give out with glib facility words and sentences which have never cost you a moment's thought. Fluency easily acquired is not a proof of ability, but a sign of intellectual

poverty. Nothing has gripped you or sunk deep ; it is all on the surface, and therefore it comes out quickly, like the seed on the stony ground. A man who thinks and who delves and quarries his own thoughts will not spring up into an orator in a year. These things always require time for growth if there is any depth.

There is sometimes a boy preacher making a great sensation in London. He is about fifteen. He would be far better employed sitting at his mother's feet. I have known a good many of these boy preachers and boy orators in my time, and I have never known one of them that lasted much longer than the fizz and flare of a rocket. What staying power can there be in these premature shoots ? What reserve stores of knowledge and reservoirs of thought can a youth of fifteen, or even of twenty, have gathered for that great work ? It is the precocity of shallowness. The seed springs up without root, and presently in the heat of trial it withers away. A thing must have some depth to endure the strain of life. What is a friendship worth which develops into ecstatic raptures and embraces in the space of a week or less ? Jonah's gourd lasts nearly as long as these sudden passions. The person who lavishes kisses and caresses on you after a day's acquaintance, and vows eternal fidelity at your second meeting, will forget you by the time the moon changes, or betray you far more easily than Judas betrayed his Master. I suppose there is

such a thing as love at first sight. I presume we are bound to believe it because novelists and poets are almost of one mind in bearing witness of it. But I would rather not trust in the love which sees once and then promises to adore for ever ; and the Lord save you from marriage bonds which are tied up on such easy terms. Lasting friendship and enduring love take months and years to grow. A man wears all the heart he has upon his sleeves who gives it at the first challenge, and such a heart is neither worth having nor exchanging. I want to *know* a man or woman before I call them by that dear expressive word "friend." I want to know something of the mind and temper and character, and that takes time. People who are all in all to you at once are just nothing at all when their fancies change, or in the hour when you rely upon them. Distrust the precocity of shallowness. These are they on the rock, which spring up forthwith because they have no root, and in the time of trial wither away.

II.

We get nearer the Saviour's thought when we speak of the untrustworthiness of a shallow religion.

There are people whose beliefs have never gone deep. Their creeds are surface things without root ; they have repeated them and assented to them

without being convinced of them ; they have not thought enough about them to feel their power or to be thrilled with the wonder and the grandeur of them. They have never really sorrowed over sin or abased themselves in true penitence, or been lifted above themselves by God's pitying and forgiving love. The great truths have only found lodgment in the thin surface soil, and if they spring up at all they yield no fruit, and in the time of temptation they wither away. It is possible to make a confession of Jesus Christ prematurely. It is possible to acknowledge yourselves as His lovers, pledged servants, and followers in a moment or a day of excited feeling. There is no real seriousness and depth in the heart which makes that great resolve, that great surrender, in a passing mood of good feeling or a short-lived swell of emotion. It is the biggest step that one can take in life. It is the most momentous of all decisions ; and he who takes it rashly and thoughtlessly does not understand it. You may be powerfully moved, drawn to Christ, and even thoroughly converted in a day ; but before you declare all that you should give time to make sure of yourselves, to prove that the change is real, and allow the new thoughts to mature and get strongly rooted. When a thing so great as this is undertaken in an impulsive spurt it is apt to be undone or forgotten as speedily. If you have not counted the cost of the Christian profession and realised its responsibility, you will not have strength

and fortitude enough to bear its burdens and resist its temptations ; and in the hour of trial the chances are that you will fall away. Our Lord says of the people whom He likens to the seed sown on stony ground—He says they receive the Word with joy. He says in another place “straightway they receive the Word with joy”—that is immediately—and by that He intimates that they ought not at once to receive it with joy. Joy should be an after-growth, and not the thing of a moment : other feelings should come first, feelings of humbling and penitence and wonder and tearful gratitude. The message which Jesus Christ brings to us is not of that kind which should awaken joy instantly. It is a message which begins with “Repent ye.” It is a message which centres in the Cross and reveals to us the awfulness and hatefulness of sin. It searches us, lays us bare, makes us ask what that guilt is which demanded so great a sacrifice. It reveals to us God’s immeasurable love and forgiveness and brings us to our knees in the penitential confession that we have not deserved such love and that we are utterly unworthy of such forgiveness. No ! such a boon as that is not to be received with prompt credulity and instant joy, but with humblings and self-questionings and amazement, and even some self-abasement.

“The mystery of so bright a bliss my feeble heart o’er-
bears,
And unbelief almost perverts the promise into tears” ;

and it is only the shallow nature that will leap up to the joy at once without the preliminary stage of repentance, self-searching, and *almost* incredulity that such great pardon and such grand promises can be possible.

I know men who take forgiveness far too easily. We wish they would hesitate a little before catching it up and appropriating it. I have visited men on a sick bed who were apparently nearing the end, whose lives had been throughout God-forgetting and more than ordinarily guilty. I have talked to them about God's mercy and the abundance of His pardon, and in ten minutes I have seen them accept it without a question and with the full satisfaction of an almost radiant joy. And I have seen those same men out again in a month, more children of the devil than ever. You have no right to receive forgiveness in this jaunty manner. It should only be accepted after the heart has been stricken with guilt and burdened with and ashamed of its sins. And they who straightway receive the Word with joy are those who never rise to the real joy, but presently fall away.

Brethren, it is the time of temptation which proves whether the seed has fallen on the thin soil or whether it has been deeply rooted—temptation in its twofold meaning of evil seductions and times of sorrow. The religion which has no root fails in times of sorrow. If your belief in the wonderful love of God and His care of you, and in the mystery

of Jesus' Cross and the sweets of His forgiveness—if that has never struck deep, never got below the surface; if it is a thing that you have talked about rather than felt; if you have never grieved with it and throbbed and burned with it, then when the trouble comes it fails you. The hold which you had on God was so slender that you lose it then; your faith cannot bear the strain. Your trust in the Father's unfailing goodness deserts you. Sorrow does not soften you; it rather makes you hard and defiant. Your religion has only been as the seed on stony ground which has no root. But get this truth deep in you, "That the heart of the eternal is wonderfully kind," that He loves you in spite of all your sins with a love that passeth knowledge, that Jesus died on the cross for you, and can never forget those for whom He died. Get that deeply rooted far below the surface, think of it until it becomes a very part of you, and then no storm of temptation or stress of sorrow will shake it. A faith of that kind will be only strengthened by trial, and bring forth its perfect fruits of patience and kindly hope in the hour which is the darkest and the day which brings most wear and pain. And so may God save us all from a shallow faith and its fickleness and failures, and help us to strike deep down near to the wells of His love and the eternal rock.

THE WHEAT AND THE TARES

BY REV. J. G. GREENHOUGH, M.A.

THE WHEAT AND THE TARES

"Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? But he said, Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest."—MATTHEW xiii. 28-30.

THE word tares, as every Bible student knows, is not quite a happy or correct rendering of our Lord's word, and it somewhat obscures the meaning of the parable. The tares which a modern farmer has to deal with are very different in appearance from the wheat with which they grow, and there is no great difficulty in separating and weeding them out. The particular weed which our Saviour had in mind was a kind of wheat now called darnel, but a degenerate plant, a false wheat, useless and even poisonous. Yet it was so much like the real thing outwardly in all the early stages of growth that only the most practised eye could distinguish between the true and the false, and he who tried to separate them before the reaping time was almost sure to mistake the good for the bad and the bad for the good. And that deceptive resemblance furnishes the main thought of the parable. In this case, as in some

others, we are favoured with Christ's own interpretation, "The wheat was of His sowing, the tares were dropped from the devil's hands. The good seed were the children of the kingdom, and the tares the children of the wicked one. The harvest was the end of the world, and the reapers were the angels." And He gave this as a picture of what His kingdom would be until the final ingathering came. He saw the Church of all the coming ages rising before Him as He looked on a Galilæan corn-field. The precious grain and the worthless stuff springing up along with it would always be found together. Wherever the good seed was sown another hand would scatter tares. Wherever the truth was given out error and superstition would creep in to corrupt or defile it. Wherever there were saints there would always be hypocrites who assumed the dress of saints. Wherever there were God's elect there would always be those who deceived the very elect. In every company of devoted disciples there would be probably a Judas, and wherever His name was worthily borne and loved there would always be a few who only borrowed it for a cloak and pretence and to degrade it. The Church would never be what His pure thoughts designed, never be the ideal Church—perfect, unspotted, and without offence—until its work on earth was done, and it was raised to be the Church glorified. That was our Lord's far-reaching view of His kingdom, and I think that no parable which He uttered showed more

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never be
perfect.

Divine foresight than this, and no parable which He uttered contained more truths and more gracious warnings than this.

I.

First, it is a parable of our own lives.

It is a picture of the best lives. It shows us the strange inconsistencies which are found in the noblest men, and partly explains them. It is a parable of Christian thought and Christian endeavour and Christian work, and of the imperfections which still mar and cripple them even when they are most praiseworthy and lovely. There is always the mixture of wheat and tares. Christ never has the field all to Himself. The enemy is sure to find some opening, some unguarded place or moment, in which he can do a little of his own sowing. There is not a bit of noble work going on in the world but the prince of darkness thrusts his hand in and makes his pernicious influence felt. You cannot find a company of Christian workers, however high-minded and earnest, in which love and brotherhood and mutual forbearance and sweet self-forgetfulness are perfect and undisturbed. There will always be a rift in the lute ; there will always be jarring notes in the music. It will never be one long sweet song. There are

sure to be things which are not born of faith, humility, and the Spirit of God. There are sure to be touches of vanity and pride and tempers which are not heavenly, and motives in which the dross of selfishness is mixed with the gold of devotion; and there will be envyings and petty egotisms, and sometimes the beginnings of strife; and the mean will be found alongside the noble, and the angelic robes will have many an unclean spot, and when Christ seems to be all in all there will be much of which Christ would say: "That is not Mine: 'an enemy hath done this.'"

*not abandon
the Church* But take care that you do not throw the work down in disgust because it is not all faultless and saintly, and because those who are doing it are like yourselves, burdened with human infirmities. This parable is to teach us patience and forbearing charity. Christ does not give up sowing because evil hands are busy in the field. He does not refuse to work with fellow-labourers because they are not entirely after His own heart. He does not fling away His weapons because they are not keen-edged and shining according to His own glory. Else should we have no part with Him at all. Do not expect to find perfection growing in the human garden: that plant is only reared in the fields of light and glory. And have patience with your fellow-workers, because the Master has unlimited patience with you. For let us never forget that the tares are growing in our own lives far too

plentifully. There is always a superabundant crop of them, however rich and promising the diviner grain may be. Christ would like to have us altogether, but He never gets us altogether. There are other masters who secure far too large a share. At our baptism we are supposed to renounce the world, the flesh, and the devil, and perhaps we do, so far as human nature can. We renounce *them*, but they never renounce us; they love us too well for that. They find the soil we offer them congenial. And all life through they still go on sowing, and the seed springs up and fights for room against the good grain, and sometimes nearly chokes it. We are poor saints at the best, and always more sinners than saints, and when the harvest time comes the angels will have enough to do with the best of us in sifting and separating the good wheat from the refuse, and casting out everything that offends; and the Lord tells us this parable that we may be comforted thereby. His thought of it is infinitely tender, compassionate, and long-suffering. He is willing to suffer the tares for the sake of the golden grain that is growing with it. He has a patience and forbearance which far exceed our own. He is willing to wait for the time when the good seed in us has grown to perfection, and when in the furnace of His love and power He has cast out and consumed the evil. "Let both grow together until the harvest."

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II.

The parable is for the Church at large, for the universal Church, and for every society of believing men whom Christ constitutes a Church.

The world is always scolding the Church and flinging its satire at the Church because it is not all that it professes to be and might be. The world says, "Why do you not root up and cast out all the tares, and preserve nothing but the good seed?" And we answer, "It is impossible." The Master foretold us all that a long time ago, that it would be impossible, and that every attempt to do it would be a failure. Only a Divine mind can judge and separate accurately; only an infallible eye can see the true and the false, and make no mistake. The best human eyes are always blundering deplorably, and they always have blundered when they have taken this business out of the Lord's hands and tried to do it themselves. The disciples of the Lord have been perpetually repeating this question, "Wilt thou that we go and gather them up?" The thought of the tares has been offensive and distressing; they have wanted to cleanse and purify the field, or, in other words, to make the Church clean and holy, a vessel meet for the Master's use. All real Christians have a share in that anxiety. We

The perpetual question.

grieve and fret and humble ourselves concerning the tares. Our hands itch and burn to pull them up. We wish to make sure that every plant in the Master's field is of His own sowing; we wish to exclude from it everything that loveth and maketh a lie. We wish to purge the truths of the Church from error, its professions from hypocrisy, its communion from souls that are not in sympathy with it. We know that the men who are in it and not of it are its main weakness, its scandal, its thorn in the flesh, and its daily offence. We should like to banish from the fold all the wolves in sheep's clothing, and all who bring the name of the Lord into dishonour. It is an honest and worthy desire. Yet the Master tells us that it cannot be. Whenever you begin rooting up the tares it will be found presently that you are leaving the tares undisturbed and plucking up and casting out the good grain. The false and unworthy people will escape your vigilance, and many of the good and Christlike souls will be flung out. The story of religious persecutions is all summed up in that.

That terrible story is a suggestive comment on our Saviour's warning and the disastrous consequences of disregarding it. The fires of the Protestant martyrs were lighted by hands which were jealous to purify the Church, so at least they said and doubtless thought. The Pope, bigot, and the priest declared, "We are bound at all cost to root

out the tares. We must cast them into the fire to separate them from the wheat. We must cleanse the Church from error, we must exterminate all heretics, we must drive out all the wolves from the fold that would devour the flock, and rid the Church of all the misguided minds that would mislead and deceive the faithful." That was their cry. And the result was too terrible for words. Poor blind fools, who thought they could do what the Master had told them they could not do! How horribly and cruelly they blundered! It was the noblest saints they cast out. It was the knaves, scoundrels, and hypocrites they kept in. It was the finest of the wheat they burned, the men of clearest light and noblest purpose and saintliest life. All the tares they spared for the Master's garner until the all-seeing Master did the work of separating for Himself.

What a lesson it is for all of us who think we are wiser than the Lord! We never can purify the Church by our crude methods. Our dim eyes are sure in many cases to overlook the true and honest men, and put the mark of acceptance on some whom the Master disclaims. We never can say with any degree of certainty who are *bonâ fide* members of the Saviour's flock, and who have no real part in it. Our best attempts are only a poor approximation to the facts. We ought not to be *over* lax. We are bound not to commune with men in Christian fellowship whose lives are manifestly and glaringly

inconsistent with Christ's law. We are bound to refuse fellowship and joint membership to those who deny or call in question the great momentous verities of our religion. Not to do that would make the Church the hold of every foul spirit instead of the household of God. Nor can we with any justice recognise those large loose theories of the Church which make its membership include a nation or any one who has been brought to the font and baptized. A Church of that kind is too much like a Noah's ark—full of all manner of creatures, clean and unclean. There must be, even for the sake of decency, and still more for the sake of the Saviour's honour, some test of character and simple faith and Christian sincerity, lest breadth degenerate into indiscriminate looseness and liberty into license. But when we have done all that is right and possible in that direction there will still be in every Church the mixture of wheat and tares. There will be many standing outside the Church who ought to be in it—men and women who have Christ's secret mark and are afraid to show it, who hardly know it themselves, whose faith is not all that we ask for, but enough, perhaps, to win the Master's "Well done ;" and there will be a few inside every Church who have no real place, and whose names are not written in the truer Church roll which they keep in heaven. The Lord only knows beyond all mistake them that are His. He keeps His own Church book, and lets no other eyes look into it.

We shall only know what He knows when the final separation comes, and it is for each one of us to search ourselves, and watch and strive and pray that on the great harvest day we may be gathered with the wheat and not rejected with the tares.

THE MUSTARD SEED

BY REV. ALBERT GOODRICH, D.D

THE MUSTARD SEED

"The kingdom of heaven is like unto a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field : which indeed is less than all seeds : but when it is grown, it is greater than the herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the heaven come and lodge in the branches thereof."—MATTHEW xiii. 31, 32.

THE beginnings of Christ's kingdom were small and insignificant indeed. He Himself, a humble man, a Galilæan peasant, without the patronage of the great or the resources of the world, He just stood up and taught in a simple, unpretentious way. He did not strive nor cry. He did not attempt to gain place in political and social movements. He would not place Himself at the head of parties which wanted Him. He would not show Himself to the people. He was indeed without form or comeliness. He was not even popular. How was He to found a kingdom? How could anything great come of such things? It looked as if the end must be miserable failure. Jesus Christ in His parable meets this thought and practically says: "Yes, I am at present insignificant; my kingdom at present is scarcely visible. It is like, however, to the mustard

seed, smallest of seeds, but in due time, when fully grown, the greatest of herbs, even a tree. This parable contains at least four reasons for the confidence that the kingdom, so small in its beginnings, would become great.

I.

For, first, the kingdom, *i.e.*, the ruling power of Christ in the individual and in society, comes, though in small yet in seminal forms.

Christianity in its beginning is like, not to the launching of a great ship or the opening of a great temple or the setting up of an elaborate government, but like to a mustard seed—a small, compact bit of matter, a potent, pungent point of substance, with no wonderful shape or remarkable features. When Christ came He did not draw out an elaborate system of Church polity as, say, the Roman Catholic Church, with its dogmas of apostolical succession, its rites innumerable, and ceremonies most complex, or even such a system as the Episcopal Church or Presbyterianism. If He had, think you it would have been received? Nor, again, did Christ attempt to set up His kingdom by setting down a series of propositions concerning God and Himself, concerning sin and redemption, and

concerning the life to come ; He did not set up any system of doctrine or creed or set of arguments, saying, "This must be accepted ere the kingdom of God can come." Had He so done, would the kingdom have taken root ? Would it ever have become greater than the herbs ? No, Jesus Christ gave us the kingdom or the truth in seed forms, in single, compact truths. He did not say, "Believe the Church" ; He said, "God is your Father in heaven ; believe that. God is love ; believe that. Religion is not a thing of creeds or systems or institutions—religion is an inward spiritual energy, a right disposition of heart toward God and man ; believe that. Learn of Me ; trust Me ; follow Me." These single detached truths, these separate but complete potent principles, these seed forms, plain, apparently innocent, insignificant things, Christ taught as the beginnings of His kingdom. "The kingdom of heaven is like unto a grain of mustard seed."

Even so to-day. To plant religion in our hearts Christ does not require us to surrender ourselves up to a vast complex system—the Church—nor to give adhesion to a long series of doctrines ; on the contrary, He says, "Take into your heart this mustard seed, God is your Father, or this mustard seed, I, Jesus Christ, am your Saviour."

II.

Then the parable suggests that despite the feeble beginnings, the kingdom will triumph because of *its inherent suitability*.

Christianity is as suitable to man as is seed to the field. There is a co-naturalness between the soul of man and the kingdom of Christ, as there is between the field and the seed. The proper environment of God's truth is man's soul. The religion of Jesus Christ is not something foreign to man's nature, not something super-imposed; it is bread to his soul's hunger, water to his spirit's thirst; it is as seed in the field of his nature, not as a stone or piece of metal. When, *e.g.*, the mustard seed of Christ's truth gets into the reason of man, processes at once are set up which issue in the knowledge of God and of self and of salvation. When the mustard seed gets into the conscience of man there is stir, movement; the two find each other; and there emerges the conviction of sin and of judgment, the recognition and appropriation of righteousness, the enjoyment of peace. When the mustard seed is sown in the heart of man there are embraces, givings and takings, warmth, movements, resulting in pure love, complete consecration, great joy. The trouble is, that the field of our nature, *i.e.*, of our true nature, is either grown over with the thorns and thistles of evil passion, or overlaid with

the great stones of hardness or infidelity, or buried beneath the rubbish of vain thoughts and worldly desires, so that the seed of the kingdom cannot get down and into the ground of our humanity. Be it ours to clear away the perilous stuff which thus overlays our soul ; in other words repent, open the heart, the inward nature, to the mustard seed of Christ's truth. Small as are its beginnings, finding there suitable environment, it will grow to surprising proportions.

III.

The amazing vitality of Christ's truth, the parable suggests, is another reason for its great growth from small beginnings.

The mustard seed is a potent, pungent nucleus, amazingly vital, capable of vast growth. In literature there have been such mustard seeds. Homer's *Iliad*, Dante's *Comedia*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and many such at the first lightly regarded, mere trifles, small things, worth, said, *e.g.*, Milton's publisher, five pounds. But what mustard seed they have proved ! How they have grown ! They are the greatest among the herbs. How glad have not a few birds been of their shelter ! Science also has dropped some mustard-seed ideas. The earth revolves round the sun, gravitation, the conservation of force, the correlation of forces, evolution ; these and the like

have been veritable mustard seeds, little nuclei of concentrated scientific truth and life, of amazing vitality and of vast capacity of growth. Thought not much of at the first, neglected or treated contemptuously, but how they have grown! They have become greatest among the herbs. They have accomplished much. Many birds of a certain kind lodge in their branches. And how movements in history at the first very small, apparently insignificant, have proved to be veritable mustard seeds. Paul passed over into Macedonia; few noticed it: but that was the first planting of Christian ideas in Europe. Luther, the son of a working miner, began to preach; at the first a few listened: but Luther proved to be the mustard seed out of which came the great tree—the Reformation. A few poor persecuted Englishmen, harried out of their country by James I. and his minions, sailed in 1620 in a poor little vessel called the *Mayflower*, and at length got to America. They were looked upon as poor fanatics; the whole thing appeared to be a trifling, miserable business. But what a grain of mustard it has proved to be! What vitality, what faith, what endurance there were in that company! Out of them have come the vitality, the liberty, the progressiveness of the United States of America. A good many birds now lodge in the branches thereof. And such ideas as the sanctity of life, the worth of the individual, the place of woman, the liberty of the subject, whose beginnings were small

enough, have been mustard seeds sown in the field of the social life ; they have grown to great proportions and have given lodgment to much that is useful and happy in life.

The truth as it is in Christ, the kingdom of God, Christ Himself, belong to and stand at the very head of all these ideas, truths, movements, which begin humbly, but which, having amazing vitality, grow to immense proportions. Man is a spiritual being ; religion is an internal disposition, not an outward performance ; God is our Father in heaven ; Jesus Christ is the Saviour ; we are saved not by works but by faith ; these and the like truths of the Kingdom of God are not as pieces of clay or chips of stone, or as the grass that withers ; they are seeds, mustard seeds, vital and vigorous, potent and pungent nuclei of spiritual truth and life. Oh, let them, brethren, be sown in our hearts ; they will grow mightily, transforming and enriching our lives. The kingdom of heaven is like unto a mustard seed.

IV.

“The birds of the heaven came and lodged in the branches thereof.” *The attractiveness of the kingdom* to all beautiful, songful things is a fourth reason of its security and power.

Some speak as if religion would silence every song, quench all colour and destroy all form, as if

it would clothe the world in grey, and feed us all on bread and water. Not so ; the Christian religion has ever attracted, given shade and shelter, security and hospitality, to all the beautiful, songful things of earth. Literature has sung some of her loveliest pieces, inspired by and under the shade of, and in the branches of, Christianity. Music would not have the "Messiah," and countless other pieces, had it not been for this tree of this kingdom. Architecture never uttered its noblest notes, nor assumed its divinest forms, till it came and lodged in the branches of the Christian religion ; and even science has found good lodgment in its branches, such as the right of private judgment and the freedom of thought. It is the Christian religion which has prevented, in good measure, the beautiful, songful things of life from being degraded into being nothing but the ministrants of vice, so losing some of their purest, divinest notes. Let none, therefore, think, if they take this mustard seed of Christianity into their heart, there is for them an end of brightness and beauty, of light and sweetness. Nay, recreation never sings so sweetly as it does in the branches of a Christian life, and art in all its forms never pours forth such heavenly strains as when it is at once inspired and directed by the Christian spirit. "The birds of the heaven come and lodge in the branches thereof."

The one lesson of the parable is, despise not small beginnings, the mustard seeds. Our Christian

work, our philanthropic efforts, may be small, insignificant ; let us not be discouraged, they are mustard seeds. And, especially, despise not the small beginnings of the religious life in your soul. The beginnings, to change the form of the parable, of the mighty river, you can hardly find them ; just a trickle or two of water far away in the hills ; why notice these trifles ? Because the great river yonder carrying merchandise and fertilisation to a vast district is in them. That serious thought, that pressure to good, that slight inclination to God, that gentle attraction to Christ rising up and trickling through your heart ; how small and insignificant they seem, just a passing impression. Nay, they are not insignificant. From beginnings as small, how many a noble, godly life has flowed through the world ! Those tiny beginnings of the river, at the first a stone in the way, the rise of an inch in the land will turn them this way or that, will determine whether they shall or shall not fertilise yonder country. Even so a hard thought, a little neglect, a foolish excuse, will turn away from you those gracious movements so small in your soul. You are tempted to neglect them because they are so slight. Yield not, dear friend, to that temptation. If you yield you may turn for ever from you the great vitalising river of God's truth and grace. Despise not these small beginnings ; prize them ; yield to them ; let them have free course in you ; open up in your soul by prayer and faith a channel

for them. For, to return to our parable, the kingdom of God is like unto a grain of mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which is less than all seeds, but when it is grown is greater than the herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the heaven come and lodge in the branches thereof.

THE LEAVEN

BY REV. J. G. GREENHOUGH, M.A.

THE LEAVEN

“Whereunto shall I liken the kingdom of God? It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.”—LUKE xiii. 20, 21.

OUR Lord never went far for His texts and illustrations. The things which He passed by in His daily walks furnished Him with all that He needed. They were vulgar and common things, with no particular beauty, until He clothed them with His heavenly wisdom, and then they became pictures and images of fadeless glory. In His teachings, as in His life, He seemed to have a special love for what was lowly and despised: things which the wise and cultured would have deemed beneath their notice He took up, and with His magic touch transformed them into precious pearls. His clay in His hands became gold, and the very dust jewels fit for a crown. What could be more insignificant and uninteresting than a grain of mustard seed and a handful of leaven? That woman putting the leaven or yeast into the flour, and then kneading or mixing it up thoroughly, until it was hidden in every part, used to be a familiar sight in most

English homes, as it was then in every Jewish house that our Saviour looked into. It was one of the homeliest and most humdrum things in the world to the ordinary mind—He only saw its Divine suggestiveness, and wove it into a truth which will be in men's thoughts for ever. It has become now, indeed, one of the most frequently used figures of speech. We talk about leavening influence, and leavening thoughts, and the leaven of good and the leaven of evil. It is so natural, so simple, and so true, and yet the world would never have thought of it if His clear eyes had not first made the discovery.

These two parables, which lie alongside, that of the mustard seed and that of the leaven, will seem to a hasty reader repetitions of the same truth. They have several features in common. They both emphasise the small beginnings of God's kingdom and predict the mighty and widespread growth which will follow. And they both alike show us the magnificent confidence which the Saviour had in Himself, His mission, and in the kingdom which He had come to build up. In both parables we see the slow, steady, irresistible advance of the Divine thought and purpose ever broadening out, striking deeper and gaining more ground. And yet along with these resemblances there is one most noteworthy difference. The mustard seed grows and expands outwardly, and openly; the leaven spreads quietly, imperceptibly, hiding its workings

from the eyes of man. One is a picture of the Church as a visible organisation, as a communion of professed believers, standing out from the world and making itself known to the world by its creeds and sacraments, its clergy and preachers, temples and congregations. The other represents rather the spiritual and moral forces of the kingdom, its thoughts and sentiments, its laws and ideals, moving on and getting themselves half unconsciously accepted, penetrating and permeating the life of the individual, and slowly diffusing themselves through the mass of human society. Or to sum it all up, the first parable sets forth the numerical and geographical magnitude of the kingdom, and the second portrays its hidden and immeasurable influence in directing and shaping the life of society and the world.

I.

“A little leaven leavens the whole lump.”

You cannot see by what means the change is accomplished. No man can understand it. It is what we call a chemical process, but that does not explain much. It is a mysterious action and reaction, a combining of affinities and separation of opposites which puzzles the cleverest science, but which results in giving a new character and a certain

wholesomeness and sweetness to the whole lump. Nothing is created, and yet it has all the effects of a new creation. And that is like the nature of man with Christ's truth and Christ's spirit dropped into it. Slowly the thing works. How it works only God knows ! The things of the spirit are always hidden in their action—you can only see the result. Little by little the leaven has entered into the whole mass, lightening it, sweetening it, transforming it. "If any man be in Christ he is a new creature ; old things are passed away ; all things are become new." Your own single Christian life is well described by the figure of the leaven. The spirit of it gets into every part of you if it is in you at all. It does not reform a few habits and tempers and leave the rest untouched. You cannot say of it, "Thus far shalt thou go and no farther." You cannot map out your lives into two departments and say this is the religious side and the other is secular. He who is not in some measure Christian throughout is not Christian anywhere. The leaven works until every bit of the meal feels its action. The odour of the Christian life spreads until it fills the whole house. Your Christian thought enters into all your thoughts. It besets you behind and before and lays its hand upon you. The whole meaning of life is changed with its affections and outlook. Your emotions are flushed with deeper and warmer colour ; your speech is toned with a finer accent ; your hopes are radiant with a new glory. The faces of your fellow

men appeal to you with more pathos. Your children draw you with a new attraction. Your sorrows and burdens wear a diviner and more cheerful aspect. Your very sky and world are painted afresh and transfigured in the heavenly light. The spirit of Christ in you stops not its hidden action until it has subdued all things unto itself. That was His view of the kingdom of God in a man. "It is like leaven which a woman hid in three measures of meal till the whole was leavened."

II.

But, secondly, our Lord Jesus saw the same action going on in a less degree in a wider field; not only in the Christian unit, but in the aggregate mass.

His spirit would steal through the community; His thoughts would get themselves a place in the thoughts of all thinking men. They would force their way irresistibly wherever they came to be known. His heavenly laws would spread and remodel earthly laws; and the whole of humanity would be reshaped and in a measure purified by a presence and power of which it was only half conscious.

We see all that going on around us in a remarkable and ever increasing degree. In our own land and

to a certain extent throughout the world, social forces are yielding to the greater unseen force of Christ's spirit. The laws laid down in Galilee are getting slowly incorporated into all human legislation and compelling recognition in the life of every society and nation. The whole of our modern ideas of justice and charity, of man's relations to his fellow men, of philanthropy and brotherhood, are feeling the throbbing pulse of Jesus' heart and mind, and assuming new forms under His invisible touch. All men get their eyes opened a little as He passes by, though not wide enough to see His glory. All men touch the hem of His garment, though they do not press close enough to enjoy His full healing. The Saviour's work is not measured at all by the comparatively few who yield themselves wholly up to His sway. The kingdom is *their* glory and strength, but it scatters waves of light and jets of blessings to those who acknowledge no part in it. The leaven has conveyed a little sweetness to the whole lump. Christ is found of them that sought Him not. He forces Himself upon those who deny Him. He blesses even those who curse Him. His influences are everywhere as universal and all persuasive as the air we breathe and the sunlight which kisses our cheeks. Men who close their ears against His voice when He appeals to them directly cannot help hearing the music with which He has filled the air around—cannot help being softened by contact with those whom He has steeped in His love.

Most surely one Christian member of an unbelieving household, though it be only a child, invariably refines and perceptibly changes the temper and habits of the whole group. A sacred influence distils and spreads like the dew of the morning. Thought becomes gentler, speech more forbearing, manners less brutal. Beautifully the little leaven spreads. And so is the action of Christian men and Christian forces in the wider household of men. It is impossible to say where it begins and where it ends. It is like the refreshing moisture or the ozone or the brine in the air which gets into every one's blood and lungs. It steals as sunlight into the very presence of unbelief and sin, when bold guilt is doing its utmost to shut it out. Everything about us has been affected by it. There is no speech nor language where its voice is not heard. It is sharp and powerful as a two-edged sword, piercing to the very innermost life of society. It is indeed as the Saviour said, "the leaven which leaveneth the whole lump."

III.

Our Lord built His hopes as much on the working of the leaven, on the silent spread of Christian forces, as He did on the visible extension of His Church and rule.

He believed that all men would be drawn to Him—would move slowly towards His person

and thoughts, as they are doing, in fact—but He certainly did not believe that while this present dispensation of things lasted all men would become His earnest and devoted followers. He never expected that the Church would become co-extensive with the world, and that every living man would take his place as a confessed disciple and regenerate member of that redeemed community ; that blessed condition of things would belong to some far later stage. He foresaw that while this world lasted the Church and the world would be found alongside. There would be a mixture of good and evil ; there would be tares of the devil's sowing and good wheat planted by the Son of God ; there would be the clash of faith and unbelief ; there would be the battle of light and darkness until the end of the world or the end of the present age. That was always His word. The Church would always be as salt in a large community which *needed* salting, and that was the work which He appointed the Church to do ; not only to make converts and enrol men in its full privileges and communion, but to spread its savour through the large mass which remained outside. We have often put another measurement on Christ's power and estimated the work of the Church by another and lower standard. We have taken the parable of the mustard seed and left out the parable of the leaven. We have counted actual and unmistakable Christians and overlooked the mighty invisible action of

Christian forces ; and have thus done terrible injustice both to the Church and its Master.

You might well call Christianity a failure if after all the years and centuries of its action in this land you are to reckon only its genuine converts, its whole-hearted lovers and followers of Jesus Christ. If that were all, or even half, then the most sanguine of us could not boast of any great success, and that is how our religion is often measured both by the believers and the unbelievers. You count the number of people who come to our sanctuaries—you tabulate the communicants who seal themselves at the Sacrament as the Saviour's own. They are only one-fifth or perhaps even one-tenth of the whole ; and that proportion is most depressing ; it is almost dismal if your estimate begins and ends there. Yes, but beyond those slender figures there is power abroad, diffused by Christian men, which all hearts feel more or less, and which laughs at the most carefully drawn up figures. The very Church building, even when it is empty on week days, awakens passing thoughts of higher things in thousands who go by—and still more does every worshipper give out to others the least breath of his own reverence and sense of God. You say the real Christian community is but one-fifth of the whole. Well, be it so. But can you measure that fifth ? Its influence is five times as great as that of the four-fifths. It contains most of the men and women who have real shaping power over other

minds. It holds nearly all the salt without which the social body would become corrupt. It keeps alive all the saving agencies and philanthropies. It carries on the main battle against human selfishness, greed and devilry. It preserves whatever high ideals the crowd outside acknowledges and applaud. It gives to all men, more or less, some consciousness of God, some touch of religious sentiment, some drawing towards the Christ. In fact it is the healthy blood which runs through the veins of the whole society, cleansing it from its worst evils. That is how Christ measures it, and it is the only true measurement—"the leaven which leavens the whole lump."

THE TREASURE AND THE PEARL

BY REV. THOMAS G. SELBY

THE TREASURE AND THE PEARL

COMPANION PARABLES OF PERSONAL RELIGION

“The kingdom of heaven is like unto a treasure hidden in the field ; which a man found, and hid ; and in his joy he goeth and selleth all that he hath and buyeth that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a merchant seeking goodly pearls : and having found one pearl of great price, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.”—MATTHEW xiii. 44-46.

BY the term “kingdom of heaven,” the vague breadth of which sometimes perplexes us, our Lord means evangelical religion both in its privilege and obligation. Amongst those who are experienced in the facts of the spiritual life it is needless to speak of these two things as separate aspects of the kingdom, for privilege and obligation so blend with each other that they may be described by one common expression. The kingdom includes both the saving favour which the king bestows upon his subjects, and the holy, loving service rendered by the subjects to their king. Citizenship implies enrichment in manifold forms, for there are no half-fed, hard-driven serfs in the kingdom centred in the Jeru-

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salem which is above. For the right of Roman citizenship "a great sum" was paid down by One of old, and perhaps he had no reason to regret his investment. A man's certificate of naturalisation may sometimes be worth as much to him as his life. To be a spiritual uitlander is sad indeed ! A place on the burgess roll of Christ's spiritual commonwealth, an indefeasible title in the kingdom He has set up, is indeed a precious treasure and a priceless pearl.

Five of the parables in this sevenfold group deal with the new religion in its effects upon the history of the world. The two short parables of the text deal with it in its rise, progress, and dominion within the individual soul. The setting up of the inward kingdom, with all which it involves, begins in a crisis of discovery. The discovery creates a temper of sacrifice ; and the temper of sacrifice becomes the condition of sure personal possession.

I.

Personal religion begins in the discovery and intelligent recognition of a great opportunity.

The twin parables have points of divergence, but agree in this one respect—the good fortune of merchant and tiller of the soil alike has its first step in knowledge, sudden insight, the intuition of a grand but passing possibility.

The joint parables illustrate *the varying pathways by which men come into conscious possession of the grace of the kingdom*. The one man is a hired labourer, or at best a tenant at will of the farm on which he toils. He goes forth to his morning task without any thought of what is to happen. As he digs or ploughs with his slow oxen upon the hillside some inequality in the surface of the soil or the sharp ring of tool or plough-share against an obstruction tells him that a hoard of ancient coins or of silver rings and anklets has been hidden there. Following up the providential clue he lights upon a jar of shekels or a box of family jewels, secreted there, perhaps, in the panic of an invasion or during the stormy times of the Maccabean wars. The owner perished on the battlefield or died a captive in a strange land, and all trace of the hoard perished with him. This stolid peasant never dreamed of the adventure which was to change his station in life. The discovery came to him by a freak of fortune, and without effort or anticipation of his own. Like the shepherds of Bethlehem he went forth upon a hard, bleak, irksome task and came upon the secret of the Advent. With the pearl merchant it was otherwise, for his calling was that of a dealer in precious stones, although his success at last outshines his dreams. In company with a travelling caravan he has carried his wares for barter to a distant land, possibly to the shores of Arabia or even to Ceylon. He leaves home with

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specific and well-thought-out schemes in his mind. His search is shrewdly planned and minutely followed out. In the tents of the caravans he meets, through the fairs and bazaars he visits, amongst the divers and the headmen of the famous oyster-grounds he was looking for pearls and chaffering over prices, although he did not expect to meet a specimen of such faultless beauty as at last came into his hand. His position was like that of the wise men from the East who found in due time that for which they had come in indomitable quest.

It has been said that in these two parables we have an epitome of the religious careers of the Jewish and Gentile nations respectively. The Gentile converts found salvation without specific seeking. They had no Messianic ideals, no prophecies of salvation to stir the pulses of the devout, no peculiar aptitude for God and the revelations of His grace. On the other hand, the history of the Jew, notwithstanding its chapters of shame and humiliation, is the story of patient, dauntless, long-continued feeling after God and His redeeming favour. The race had a pronounced genius for religious ideas. In this interpretation of the paired parables there may be a degree of rough truth, but we are on safer ground when we apply the teaching to individuals, and to the types into which they group themselves, rather than to entire nations. The centurion at Capernaum and Cornelius at Cesarea, although belonging to Gentile nations, resembled

the merchant who went seeking goodly pearls ; whilst Paul the Jew seemed to come into the possession of his spiritual riches by the unexpected method of the ploughman, without plan or quest of his own. There are those who, all their lives long, guided by the intimations of God's Word, have been seeking the supreme good, and such cannot finally fail ; whilst others who live heedless and unspiritual lives, pursuing a dull daily routine, without ideals or lofty emotions, are suddenly brought face to face with the promise of salvation and embrace it by the choice of the moment. It is only when the treasure glitters upon their view that the vow is taken. In both cases the sacrifice, which is the next step towards conscious possession, begins with the recognition and discovery of a great opportunity.

The first parable perhaps indirectly expresses *Christ's sympathy with the routine work of the common people*, and His assurance that those who occupy themselves with mean, laborious, unromantic tasks are as much in the way of salvation as philosophers and scribes. The unearthing of the great treasure came to the ploughman in the round of his humdrum duties. He was not an assayer of metals or a professional dealer in precious stones. He stands for the man who has little or no leisure to investigate subjects which lie apart from the quest of honest, daily bread. But Providence did not forget to put into his common round the opportunities

which enrich and save. He illustrates the truth that God is found of those who seek Him not and who seem to have little time to seek. But Jesus is no one-sided partisan. His message is to all classes. In the second parable the man who can spend his days in seeking for that which is good and true is not thereby disqualified, but finds that which is better than his best hopes. The statement of the gospel and its all-comprehending promise would have been incomplete without the second parable.

In every life there comes sooner or later a day of illumination, for the wise use of which all past experience has been making ready. Some moment springs upon us, some turning in the ways is reached, a new epoch dawns, of which there has been little or no prevision, and we are made to feel the mysterious value of religion. The two men of the parables had been taught by the strain and struggle of the past to welcome the good fortune which changed their subsequent history. If some barbarian, ignorant of the place filled by precious metals in the currency of civilised empires, had come across these treasures he would have despised them and lost his opportunity. The Australian black man had been walking like a skeleton in a skin over rich gold reefs for centuries, but had been so isolated from the world and its ways, and so embruted by his tribal traditions, that one piece of rock had no more value in his sight than another. The ploughman and the merchant of the parable

had been trained in a school where they learned the significance of a great opportunity when it arose. Treasure and pearl once acquired would deliver them from the hazards, hardships, and distressing anxieties of the bygone years and make a new era of happiness for themselves and their families. Perhaps they shed no tears at the thought of their early privations and the straits to which they had been put, but they did what was far better, seized with lightning eagerness a golden occasion, that might come only once in the course of their lives. It was not in vain they had hitherto lived, for they had acquired the wisdom demanded by the promise of the hour.

Our past history, if we learn its lessons aright, ought to make us see what the door into a new world means which opens before us in the preaching of the gospel. Perhaps we have come to feel regret and dismay because of the follies and transgressions which refuse to be conjured into oblivion. We are secretly affrighted at the unconfessed anarchies which smoulder in our tempers, and we feel the need of a strong hand laid upon us for the effectual ordering of our life. We have been brought to the threshold of the unseen, have peered with trepidation into its shadows, and have learned that the life beyond cannot be lived by help of the cheap currencies of earth. The law of life and salvation, if God would only convey it into us, is better than thousands of gold and silver. The

crisis comes, and we see that a renovated life and an uplifted destiny are possible to us if we only make haste to redeem the opportunity.

II.

The crisis of discovery must beget a temper of self-denial, if it is to be followed by high enrichment and abiding blessing.

A wise man will be eager to acquire at any cost that which he sees to be of supreme magnitude and value. A poor ploughman would find it no easy task to buy the freehold of a field. The mere idea of such a thing would daunt a weakling. What! put himself and his wife and children upon short commons, sell his poor household effects, pledge his cattle, provoke the opposition of his friends and kinsmen, and run the risk of being called a madman, and for a venture he cannot for the time explain to any one? Preposterous! But he thinks again, and sees what the opening means, and buy the field he must and will. And of the same dogged temper is the travelling merchant who has suddenly met the most splendid chance of his life. Every article of value brought upon his camels he will sell; the meagre margin he has kept for his long and precarious journey home shall go; his sleeping carpet, his outer robe and his sandals shall be pawned—but that amazing pearl he must possess,

and will. If the grand end is gained, passing hunger, cold and discomfort, are trifles not to be reckoned with. Self-denial is the only gateway of access to the object which has fascinated his imagination, and he enters it with eager and unfaltering step. He is not the man to despond or to be turned back when such a prospect is before him. So is it with all those who have come to recognise that the religion of the kingdom is the crowning interest of life.

We live in ages of latitude and toleration, and are often tempted to think that the maximum good of the gospel may now be attained at a minimum cost ; and the fact that God's love is so free to every man sometimes confirms us in this ignoble idea. The centuries of persecution are gone, and Christ's hard sayings to His first disciples we class with the obsolete rule of the curfew. Oh, how pleasant it is for every man to sit under his own vine and fig tree, none daring to make him afraid. The pearl and the treasure may be obtained upon the easiest possible terms, like the books and other articles offered to us by an agent at the door upon a pleasing, feather-weight instalment system. The man in the street dearly loves a preacher who makes religion cheap and accommodates his message to the demand for excitement and worldly indulgence. The instinct for immense bargains operates in some people's religion. If salvation is accepted it must be on terms which will not burden or distress

us. As Jesus views the subject the kingdom of God can never come to men in this way. God is stupendous in His generosity and gives without money and without price. He wants nothing from us but trust and submissive love. And yet we cannot receive without that which seems to us in our unregenerate state a sacrifice. As we gain deeper insight into the worth and power of religion the sacrifice required from us seems so small that no fraction in our currency can express it.

Sacrifice is a sign of that awakening of the spiritual senses which is at the root of personal religion. It is impossible to effectually possess a thing whilst the mind is locked in slumber. A rich man only realises that he is an owner of estates, pictures, jewels, silver and gold, whilst his senses act ; and in his dreams he may be distressed by the idea that he is a pauper. Till he awakes with the daydawn his life differs little, if at all, from that of the labourer on his estate. It is only in his waking hours that the wise man can command his stores of knowledge, and Solomon is in no sense superior to the fool when Solomon puts a drowsy head upon his pillow. The dreams of the sage are as muddled and vacuous as those of the dullest slave. The possession of religion implies that the faculties of the soul are keen, active, wide open. There can be no apprehension of its power whilst the inward senses are numbed and unlocked. When for some great and inspiring end we are willing to give up the world

and all that we have prized in the past the dormancy of our moral perceptions is gone. Commercial ventures, in which you do not risk a day's income and that yield but a small percentage of profit, do not compel you to open your eyes very wide. But if you had the prospect of becoming a millionaire by risking every penny in your possession, your eye would grow keen as an eagle's and you would put every power of the brain on the watch. Surrender and sacrifice are the best tests and guarantees of activity and vigilance. If we would have a true inward religion much must be relinquished, not because it is evil in itself, but because it deadens the soul and films over the consciousness of God and spiritual things. The man who sets himself to reckon how much of the world he may be permitted to keep and sedulously minimises the self-abnegations to which he will consent is not likely to have a full experience of religion. Much that we may surrender will be given back to us, even in the present life, but at the outset all things must be accounted as dross for Christ's sake. Religion must be the first and last thing with us if our whole nature is to be stirred and we are to know the full measure of its benign power. We can only possess and retain a thing if we feel its worth.

The giving up of all things to secure the blessings of the kingdom is a manifestation of that faith which is so closely linked with the experience of salvation. Acts of sacrifice are repugnant to men, whilst

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suspicious and unbelieving moods possess them. A shrewd capitalist will not stint and strain himself to make investments in States which seem to be on their last legs. In looking through a broker's list of stocks and shares you can find out with a fair degree of exactness how much confidence the public puts in the stability and good faith of the governments of Great Britain, Russia, China, Japan, Peru, and Turkey. What price will the purchaser give for these bonds? The price he is content to pay represents his belief. A religion is bankrupt and has nothing to offer to men when its adherents make no sacrifices on its behalf. The idolatries of the world survive and maintain their mastery over the minds of men not so much because of the pomp of their rituals, but because of the exactions they make upon their worshippers. The sacrifices required are a visible register, in which the devotee can see as in a mirror the degree of faith in the supernatural felt by himself and his fellows. They are a popular test of value, often untrue and misleading, doubtless, but none the less impressive and convincing, and Jesus, who brings to men the substance, cannot be content with the putting forth of less faith than men show who have yielded themselves up to systems in which fiction predominates over truth; nor will He be pleased that men should show their faith by less severe tests. By the self-denials He asks from His disciples He stimulates the processes of inward persuasion and builds up their faith in

the everlasting value of that which they have received. The temper of ploughman and pearl-merchant commended in the parable tends to make faith steadfast and abiding. We give hostages thereby for our own fidelity in the after days. A man will watch and guard and defend to the utmost of his power, at the cost of ease, pleasure, and personal comfort, that which comes to him in a crisis of high illumination. The sacrifice makes the faith arising at an extraordinary juncture in his history the abiding faith of his common life.

But sacrifice is *a pledge of obedience as well as of faith*. The new religion which centres in the person of Jesus can only rule us by saving us, and the hearty surrender of all that to which we have been clinging in the past tests the degree of our submission to His saving authority. Jesus comes to us with the grace and favour of a newly anointed king, but with a sceptre of high authority, an authority founded upon His loving-kindness and redeeming compassion. No religion can maintain its sway over human hearts without requiring costly tokens of the allegiance of its votaries. Jesus would have lowered the sanctions of the gospel and have subordinated His religion to that of other teachers, unless He had demanded as much or more than other systems demand, although He rests the demand upon an entirely different basis. He promises upon a more munificent scale, and the claim He makes upon His followers as they stand upon the threshold

is proportionate in its magnitude. To make His terms too easy would have discredited both the pledges and precepts He announced. Religion can never save us till it begins to direct us, and to do this it must become at the very beginning the foremost interest in our lives. Sacrifice is the guarantee that the faith which is springing up within us will sway conduct. We can only be absolutely ruled by that which we account of surpassing value and importance. If there is a single thing you refuse to give up, so that you may enter into the power and privilege of the gospel, it is obvious that you think religion of inferior significance to the secret idols which enslave your affections. Men's lives are never shaped in their vital outlines by faiths which rank lower than their commercial and domestic interests, and Christianity itself can do nothing for us unless we give it the regal place in our thought and love.

It is said that an African tribe observes a curious custom when it appoints a new chief. After it has chosen the coming man it rolls him in the dust, cuffs him and treats him with every mark of contempt. This contemptuous horseplay over, the tribesmen proceed to install their ruler. The meaning of the custom is not easy to explain. Perhaps it is to test his patience and good temper, or to make much of the last opportunity they will have of treating him as a man of the same clay with themselves. Such a send-off would not satisfy our view

of a coronation or tend to establish the authority of the king in our hearts. The man who is to rule us must be honoured with gifts for himself and others, must be clad in rare fabrics, and must be the object of homage.

The most royal of all religions demands absolute submission and unfaltering sacrifice, because it will not brook the dishonour of an inferior place in our lives. It can only save and uplift by ruling us, and our unreserved surrender is the pledge of our future loyalty to its rule. Religion must be put on the highest throne. Its sceptre over us can never be swayed from some obscure position at the circumference of our lives. Christianity will do no more for its followers than Hinduism, Confucianism, Shintoism, Parseeism, and a score of other isms unless it become the supreme thing in our judgment and affections. Jesus would have discredited His own work and have disparaged His own truth if He had competed with the religious founders of the world in making the terms of salvation easy to the selfish and the irresolute.

The demand for sacrifice expressed in these two parables, and in many other sayings, *does not eliminate from the Christian religion its distinctive principle of grace, or minimise its place in the work of salvation.* Our self-denial and our self-surrender have their necessity in us and our own poor natures rather than in God. These acts and tempers put us in a fit state to receive and to appreciate, and in no sense move

the heart of the Eternal to a benignity He would not otherwise show. Ploughman and pearl merchant must not be looked upon as illustrations of the doctrine of salvation by works. God gives without money and without price. The margin between that which we surrender and that which we receive is vast and immeasurable. A scanty wardrobe, a few sticks of furniture, a plough and a spade are sold, and the prosperity which endures for many generations is secured. A few weeks of privation and discomfort are faced, and a pearl is possessed for which kings compete. We muster courage for a jumble sale and we get a ruby mine. We give up for a moment, and we receive for ever. We relinquish folly, and we attain a religion which is better than thousands of gold and silver, and no vicissitudes can impair its worth. It is bound to appreciate by unhalting steps through the years of time and the ages of eternity. My petty self-abnegation and the unsearchable riches God bestows are two poles between which many worlds filled through and through with grace can be put.

III.

The parable teaches that the new religion is a specific and experimental possession, and not guess-work.

The successive steps of search, discovery, and sacrifice, lead to a richly dowered life, in striking

contrast to the old. The chapter of penury is closed, and fresh horizons come into view. The figures before us have passed from death unto life. A thrill is felt in these new acquisitions to which the dull, stolid, complacent man who inherits lands, cattle, and much silver, is an entire stranger.

Whilst true religion ripens through its own inherent forces into an all-communicating fellowship, it begins as a pursuit and a new enrichment for the individual. Those to whom the parables were first addressed had not been accustomed to look at God and His service from this standpoint. They enjoyed the privileges of election, it was assumed, in virtue of their natural descent. The blessing promised to the patriarchs and their seed was entailed, and the entail was not likely to be cut off. From Abraham, through a long series of generations, the birth-right had been handed on, and it was not going to be made void. The beatitudes went, like the land, in the line of blood, and salvation did not need to be sought and found. It was an axiom with the Jew that he shared in the benefits of a spiritual commonwealth without effort or violent struggle, just as he shared in the air and the dew of heaven. There was no crisis of acceptance, in his view of things, when the destiny seemed to tremble in the balance. The Jewish theocracy was the old theory of a State Church carried to its most extreme conclusions, and Jewish history illustrates the danger and temptation

incident to such an arrangement. It is right and fitting that we should give collective voice to our religious principles and aspirations; but when Church and State are almost synonymous terms men begin to fancy that the joint corporations constitute a sufficient security for their spiritual well-being, and that they pass into the privileges and experiences of religion as naturally as they grow into citizenship. When such ideas prevail the demand for conversion is always weakened and obscured. The State which guarantees its subjects against ignorance and starvation will surely guarantee salvation likewise. This, of course, is perilous and unscriptural.

Some interpretations of Christianity are familiar to us which make salvation an object of hope, a reversionary interest, rather than a clear personal possession, and such interpretations are condemned by the tenour of these parables.

Religion, as our Lord expounds it, means present gain, large advancement, a bettered lot for each disciple who accepts it. Corporate wealth does not always do much for the individual who is supposed to have a vested interest in it. The possessions of the British nation are theoretically the common property of its subjects. The millions who are below the poverty line are nominal partners in the British Museum, have a stake in the Crown Jewels, and if these treasures were put up to public auction, might conceivably claim a tiny dividend. But this

reversionary interest is sentimental, and multitudes, whose citizenship is as valid as our own, are hungry, naked, homeless. A man cannot go to a stockbroker, realise his small share in the concern, and get a good meal with the proceeds. A corporate but undivisible interest in untold wealth does not alleviate the bitterness often present in the personal lot. A man is rich by that which he can appropriate to his own needs. The kingdom set up by Jesus is a commonwealth, but its true benedictions are not necessarily realised through birth, baptism, natural inheritance, outward affiliation. We have to establish a personal title, out of which nothing can cheat us, to the benefits of redemption, and make all things our own through living union with the Lord of all. The treasure and the pearl must be brought within each man's grasp, and be made to serve his separate needs. Personal religion is conscious ownership, and means peace, righteousness, and spiritual joy in one's own soul. Divine favour distinguishes the man who seeks and finds from all other men, at least in the form of its inward attestation. All the riches of God's loving-kindness pour themselves into his lap. The grace which manifests itself in present salvation is expressly specialised to me. In the new joy of possession it seems as though God had but one son, and I was that chosen son, a great prince upon the earth. There is a smile meant for me rather than for the crowd. And this, whilst not the only or the final aspect of experimental

religion, is no illusion. God is something to me that He is to no other, and I fill a place in His love no other can fill. To His saved people one by one, He gives a more exquisite assurance of His love than they could enjoy if they were the idols of their contemporaries. God is mine. He breathes into my ear music which no one else can catch. The religion of the new kingdom is personal in its experimental privileges, although world-wide in its obligations.

We are not, perhaps, pressing the parable too far when we look upon it as teaching that *the supreme blessedness of religion attests itself to the personal consciousness*. It is open to lucid inward verification. The merchant knew when he was without the pearl which had kindled his hopes; he knew when the acquisition of it had become possible or he would not have straitened himself to make a bid; and he knew likewise when the sale was confirmed, or he would not have gone back in quiet triumph to his home. Family farewells, the risks and hardships of the pilgrimage, the successful return most of all, hinged upon clear ideas. Our apprehension of the blessings of redemption ought to be as incisive and as much beyond dispute as a bargain with honest business men. If it is not so we have failed to treat religion as though it were real. The laws of the kingdom under which the best of all treasures may be surely acquired are less precarious than the plainest and most trustworthy commercial codes;

and whilst in all speculative theology there is room for more or less of doubt and conjecture, experimental religion is an insistent substance. Some excuse might be made for a ploughman who might not be quite sure of the laws governing treasure-trove, or for the merchant who was surrounded by the customs of a strange land, if he thought twice before taking the great step, but even in those cases protracted hesitation would have been unpardonable. Transcendent interests are at stake, and sharp sacrifices are required at our hands, and we must be sure of our ground. But this is possible to us. We are placed under the laws of a kingdom, expressly ordained to make the riches of spiritual experience the surest things in life. If you lack the one thing you know it. If you have come to the golden threshold, and are standing there, you know it, or may soon assure yourself. And you know when your rights as a possessor are put beyond all dispute. Personal religion is meant to revolutionise and to build up on stronger foundations our sense of life.

The parable suggests that the act which makes this wonderful change must be immediate. The chances confronting the men of these parables might have irrevocably passed away in twenty-four hours. Bring into religion the promptness of the resolute business man. On the Exchange moments often mean thousands of pounds sterling. Opulence and dismal ruin may be separated from each other by

dots on the dial of a clock. And moments count for just as much in the transactions within the soul.

Your sacrifice once made stand to it at all hazards. Think of the pearl and not of the passing discomforts involved in your choice. Look at the eternal riches and not at the momentary privations incurred by your action. Sometimes the man who has the pearl in his hand is tempted to pledge it for a time so that he may recover his worldly ease. Of course he does not intend to finally surrender it. He will get it back when things are a little smoother. "Buy the truth and sell it not."

A rare earthly gem may sometimes become a peril to its custodian or possessor. One of the three most famous diamonds of the world was once in the possession of a French nobleman. It was watched for years by men who were intent upon stealing it. The nobleman at length thought it prudent to remove it to a safer place than his ill-defended country castle, and it was entrusted to an attendant charged to carry it through the forest to its new resting-place. The robbers prepared to waylay the faithful servant, who seeing them approach, swallowed the stone so as to thwart their plot. The robbers fell upon him, cut his throat, and searched his clothes in vain for the object they coveted. Twelve months later, within the ribs of a skeleton under a tree of the forest, the rare diamond was found. It had been the poor man's death. Religion, priceless though it is,

cannot be a possession which will ever bring us into peril. He who acquires it has a charmed life which the legions of evil cannot harm. In the act of ruling us Christ's religion will save us, and this to all ages. It is more precious than the soul—precious as the soul of infinite value that ransomed all other souls. It is, of course, undervalued by the world. You hear there that it is of second-rate importance, and that other things must be looked to first. To which will you give heed—the verdict of the world, or the verdict of Him who is the wisdom of God? To which course do your own best instincts point? What will you do? Are you ready to surrender all so that you may gain Christ? The man who had made a sharper sacrifice than any perhaps possible to us in the present age counted all things loss so that he might gain Christ.

THE TREASURE AND THE PEARL

BY REV. ALFRED ROWLAND, D.D., LL.B.

THE TREASURE AND THE PEARL

“The kingdom of heaven is like unto a treasure hidden in the field ; which a man found, and hid ; and in his joy he goeth and selleth all that he hath and buyeth that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a merchant seeking goodly pearls : and having found one pearl of great price, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.”—MATTHEW xiii. 44-46.

THE arrangement of the parables in this well-known chapter is almost as significant as are the parables themselves. This pair is preceded by another pair in verses 31-33. There the parable of the mustard seed points to the outward development of the kingdom, while the parable of the leaven deals with its inward reception. The former reveals the visible growth of the Church, from an insignificant beginning, while the latter shows that its advance would be by a process of assimilation—making like itself all that it touched, whether in a man or in society. Then follows the parable of the drag-net, and after it the two now under consideration, and they indicate the different ways in which spiritual life is laid hold upon by different men. These also are supplementary to each other. They

are like binary stars, which revolve around each other, to afford one another mutual illumination. Or, to change the figure, they are like a stereoscopic picture, which stands out clearly because it consists of two photographs taken from different standpoints.

It is the finding of life in Christ which seems to be illustrated here.

I.

The preciousness of what is found is set forth by the two emblems: a treasure and a pearl of great price.

Each of these would readily appeal to popular imagination. In those days, when banks and investments, of which modern life knows so much, were non-existent, money was often buried for safe keeping. This would be the more natural because the condition of society was insecure, and rapacious rulers, represented by extortionate publicans, taxed every man according to the wealth he was supposed to possess. Each man, therefore, hid his money. But if it was hidden, the owner might conceivably have to go abroad, as Priscilla and Aquila did when the Jews were expelled from Rome; and thus not infrequently the secret of the hidden store would be lost, through the death of those who never returned. Even in the present day, under the

ill-conditioned Turkish rule, this practice of secreting money prevails, and the belief that treasures lie hidden here or there has long proved a hindrance to the researches of antiquarians, as the Palestine Exploration Society has often found to its cost. Unexpected discoveries of gold and jewels formed the basis of tales like those of Aladdin's lamp, and a caste of men professed to have the secret of being able to indicate buried treasures, much as in the West country men still profess to find secret springs of water by the twisting of a hazel wand. There are allusions to buried money in Scripture. For example, there is the well-known text, "Seek for wisdom, as for hid treasure;" and in the Book of Jeremiah we read that Ishmael forebore to slay ten men of Shechem because they promised, if their lives were spared, to reveal to him treasure hid in the fields.

The travelling merchant seeking goodly pearls would also be a familiar figure to our Lord's hearers—a man eager, keen, trained for his special work. He was seeking "goodly pearls"—not clever imitations, not impure specimens, but those which were smooth and beautiful, till, finding one of unique value, he sold all that he had in order to make it his own.

This pearl would be the more fit emblem of life in Christ, because its value was not dependent on human touch. A diamond, a ruby, or an emerald

requires to be cut and polished on the lapidary's wheel before its beauty appears. But a pearl, brought up from the depths of the sea, fashioned so strangely and secretly by the oyster, needs nothing of such manipulation. Therefore it more fitly represents the perfect Gospel of the perfect Christ, God's unspeakable gift to the world, which needs no improvement at our hands. If this be our own, with all that it involves, it is an inestimable and lasting boon. Therefore let us seek it above all else, knowing that other things will then be added to us, instead of doing, as multitudes do, who seek earthly things first, hoping that the kingdom will somehow or other be added at last if, with failing powers and hasty prayers, it is sought in the hour when life darkens into death.

II.

We ought to note that the treasure and the pearl were both hidden at first from the men who ultimately made them their own.

The truth is that God hides many of the most precious things in order that they may be sought for, and each requires its own appropriate method and spirit to be adopted before it is found. Hence, the man who most easily gains one sort of knowledge is often the slowest in perceiving another. Spiritual truth, for example, has often been quite

outside the range of thought in the experience of some of the cleverest and most learned men in the world. There are some people who seem to think in blinkers. They see vividly what is immediately before them, yet they fail to discern, or even to suspect, what is outside their usual range, though it may be equally close and real. They can discover a microbe, but they do not see God. Probably Elisha's servant was far-sighted enough to see the distant hosts of the Syrians, but before he could discern the still nearer "chariots and horses of fire round about Elisha" his master had to pray, "Lord, open this young man's eyes, that he may see."

Remember that Christ Himself was a hidden treasure, an unsuspected pearl to men of His own time. Not only had He been veiled for generations in the types and shadows of Judaism, but when He was actually present in the world John the Baptist had to say, "Behold there standeth One among you whom ye know not." And none suspected the world-wide effects of the movement Christ inaugurated. These also were hidden. Lucian was not the only thinker of that period who saw signs of a vast religious change coming over the world's faiths, but they all quite failed to suspect its cause and direction. The treasure was "hidden" in the field, and many walked right over it, without so much as dreaming that it was there.

Now, is not this still true? Is not the spiritual kingdom which Christ says is "within you" a

hidden mystery to multitudes? They are familiar with the Bible, they join in public worship; they know a good deal about Church organisations and denominational distinctions; they appreciate the moral teaching of our Lord—but the inward life, with its joys and hopes, fostered by prayer, is to them as a hidden treasure, because it can only be spiritually discerned. In short, they are like Nicodemus, who knew the law, and was a recognised teacher of it, and yet he was baffled and amazed by the declaration, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Let us remember, then, that no man has the right to say spiritual experiences do not exist because he does not perceive them. He cannot appreciate art if he has no artistic faculty, or music if he has no musical ear. Similarly virtue and vice require moral faculty, and religious life demands inexorably spiritual perception and sensibility. The man referred to in the parable might have walked over the field enjoying the pleasantness of the verdant grass and the fragrance of its flowers, he might have dug the field or ploughed it, and reaped crops of corn from its surface, and yet have had no suspicion of the treasure below his feet. But, to his joy, the day of revelation came at last; and God grant that it may come to every one of us now!

III.

This knowledge, however, required to be supplemented by resolve and effort.

Neither the treasure nor the pearl became the man's own till sacrifice of other things was made in order to secure its possession. Probably most Christians have known this in experience. In some form or other there is a giving up which is coincident with welcoming. It may be a cherished companionship, or a pleasant amusement, or a habit long indulged, or a prejudice, or a besetting sin ; but in any or all of these it is really the giving up of self-will which actually counts. This is sometimes so painful that Paul rightly spoke of it as a crucifixion. No one else can make this sacrifice in our stead or on our behalf. What is inward, as this is, demands personal effort and apprehension. It is so with information of any kind, which must be held in one's own mental grip to be of any value to one ; and it is so, above all, with the intuitive efforts of the soul—whether to put aside the evil or to receive the good. But when there comes the sudden realisation of salvation from sin and doubt, in Christ Jesus, there is "joy" even in what seems to be sacrifice ; such as he had who, having found the treasure, "for joy thereof went and sold all that he had" to make it his own.

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Many a Christian has known something of this, and finds no exaggeration in the words we sing of Jesus, our Saviour and King :—

“Yes, He is mine, and nought of earthly things,
Not all the charms of pleasure, wealth and power,
The fame of heroes, or the wealth of kings,
Could tempt me to forego His love an hour.
Go ! worthless world, I cry, with all that's thine
Go ! I my Saviour's am, and He is mine.”

IV.

Such are some of the suggestions common to the two parables. *But each is distinct from the other.*

If for a few minutes we now contrast them, we see considerable difference in the mode of discovery suggested. *The treasure-finder, walking over the field,* or ploughing it, suddenly and unexpectedly saw the gleam of gold, or heard the ring of metal. He found something unlike that which he had anticipated. He may, therefore, fairly represent one who is naturally heedless, or intent on earthly things, who has seen the outward forms of religion, but has never seen what is beneath them. Suddenly, perhaps during some service or mission, he is conscious of a strange power affecting him. He becomes convicted of sin, and soon after he rejoices in forgiveness and reconciliation to God. There

are many examples of such an experience recorded in the New Testament. The woman of Samaria never expected to find the water of life, which would quench the soul's thirst, when she set out for the familiar well, as she had done hundreds of times before. The robber crucified on Calvary never anticipated that he would be saved in the very hour of his death, and that, in spite of his career of crime, Jesus of Nazareth would say, "To-day shalt thou be with Me in paradise." The Philipian jailer, who with needless cruelty thrust his prisoners into the inner prison, and made their feet fast in the stocks, would have laughed to scorn any man who had foretold that in a few hours he would be crying out to his despised prisoners, in agony of soul, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And thus may any one now, by means we do not think much of, be suddenly made possessors of joy, and peace, and heaven.

Think next of this merchant seeking goodly pearls— testing each, trying each, in the ordinary routine of business—till at last he finds one which in value includes and surpasses all the rest. He only discovers something like in nature (though not in cost) to what he had been daily seeking. Probably men of the type he suggests are growingly numerous. They are not startled by a sudden change, and know but little of ecstatic joy. They have sought goodly pearls all their lives. From their early childhood, in a Christian home, they

have loved and sought after "whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, and whatsoever things are of good report." Instead of contenting themselves with gratifying passion or with making money, they are upright and earnest, pitiful, considerate, and courteous ; their home is the abode of purity and love, and their graces are as a diadem of goodly pearls. Yet still they lack one thing—the chiefest thing, which will include and enshrine all else—the living Christ, who may be formed in their hearts as the hope of glory. Examples of this type of experience may also be found. Simeon was one of them, for he was "just and devout," and waiting for the consolation of Israel ; but when at last his greatest hope was fulfilled, as he took Jesus into his arms, he was satisfied, and said "Now, Lord, lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace . . . for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation." Cornelius, the centurion, was another who "feared God with all his house" ; but when the Evangel was preached by Peter, and the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the Word—he became a changed man, a new creation in Christ. It was not in vain that Jesus said (and He says it still), "He that is of the truth heareth My voice."

There is another contrast in religious experience worth noting.

The treasure-finder was overpowered with delight, boisterous in his joy ; and instantly on the impulse

sold all that he had and bought the whole field. But the merchant man exhibited no such enthusiastic joy ; for he found what he had been looking for and had half expected to find at last. The contrast appears in actual experience. Cornelius seemed quite calm after Peter's sermon, but the jailer in his exultant joy could have used the words of the exiled Jews, "Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing." Listen to a hallelujah-lass, just brought out of darkness into marvellous light. Song, tambourine, dancing, all together do not adequately express her delight ; yet not less real is the piety of that young girl who has always been known for her sweet life and gracious temper, who now for the first time with calm assurance and earnest love can call Jesus "Lord." These perhaps in many congregations are the more numerous ; and good Richard Baxter was right when he said, "If home were truly Christian, children would not need to be converted by sermons ; they would grow up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." With all our hearts we thank God for those who have known and loved Him from their youth ; who through Christian heritage and nurture are the better prepared to strengthen the Church in its conflict with error and evil.

It is evident, then, from these contrasted parables, both of which are true, that no one experience is the rule for every convert.

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The heart of one may be broken by an agonizing sense of sin; the heart of another, like that of Lydia, may be gently and quietly opened. Therefore we must be fair and broad-minded in our judgment of others' experiences; if indeed we venture to judge of them at all. Nor must we forget to be just to ourselves, but should gratefully recognise the work of God's Spirit in any phase of inward grace. Though we may not have passed through the experience of some one else, it is enough if we can say, "Lord, Thou knowest all things, Thou knowest that I love Thee."

Above all, let us seek the treasure ourselves, if we have not already found it, and do not overlook it, as some do, because it is so close.

A traveller asking for a drink of water at a cottage door was startled by the cursing and quarrelling going on within; and when he ventured on a remonstrance he was met by the excuse, "You little know all that we poor people have to put up with." "True," said he, "but I do know of a treasure in this very house which would make you rich, and which you might find if you would but look for it." They regarded it at first as a jest; but afterwards searched through every room, looked under the floor and felt in the thatch—all in vain. One day the husband happened to lay his hand on the old family Bible, which lay in a corner, covered with dust. It had not been opened since his mother's death. Turning over its worn pages—

worn by her hands, not his—his eyes lighted on this verse : “The law of thy mouth is better unto me than thousands of gold and silver.” “Wife,” said he, “perhaps this is the treasure the stranger spoke of.” It proved so ; for both through it found Him who is the everlasting Word, who spoke peace to their unquiet hearts, and ruled their tongues and tempers, till their home became like heaven.

Dear friends, my message is simple, familiar, but true. Hidden here, for you and me, is “the treasure” God would have us seek—the pearl of great price, surpassing all earthly riches in value ; and still the old message of Christ rings out to all who have ears to hear—“Ask, and it shall be given *you* ; seek, and *ye* shall find.”

THE DRAG-NET

By REV. ALBERT GOODRICH, D.D.

THE DRAG-NET

"The kingdom of heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind ; which, when it was filled, they drew up on the beach ; and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but the bad they cast away."—MATTHEW xiii. 47, 48.

I.

This suggests, first, the *simplicity* and *modesty* of the organisation of Christianity.

THE kingdom of heaven is like unto a net ; string just knitted and knotted together, dropped quietly in the sea, there taking no space, making no noise or display, invisible, almost, not like a wall, resisting, but through its meshes letting the waters play freely in and out of it, gently moving on towards the shore, enclosing fish ere they know it and compelling those enclosed to move forward into ever diminishing space, till at length they are landed on the shore : to this, not to a conquering army with banners and trumpets ; to this, not to a temple, massive and impressive, does our Lord here compare the kingdom. The kingdom of Christ is a great network of truths and movements, of influences and institutions

cast into the sea of mankind. It is not very visible; it makes no display. A man or two, *e.g.*, without retinue, enters India or China and just talks out the truth. At the first the people take no notice of them, no more than the fish of the net. Quietly they speak and live and work on. Impressions are made, confidence is won, influences are set agoing, Christian ideas get abroad and little societies are formed. Year after year this process proceeds. By the Divine Providence these sundry Christian things are knitted together till a great net is formed in which the people find themselves enclosed. Some are well content, but some are angry at the restraints they discover coming nearer and nearer to them, and they begin, like netted fish, to plunge here and there to escape. Yet no force has been used; no elaborate machinery or military organisation, no Acts of Parliament have been passed or legal apparatus set up. All is simple, slight, frail, some might say modest to meanness. "The kingdom of heaven is like unto a net."

II.

The kingdom of heaven is like unto a net—a net of a special kind, a sean-net or drag-net, a net which reached from the surface to the bottom of the sea and extended to a great length.

This net was cast into the sea, not into a river or lake. Christianity is for the world; the great world

or sea of mankind is its fishing ground. The parable thus gives us a second idea of Christianity—*its universality*.

Its universality is further taught in that it gathered fish of every kind, flat and not flat fish, shell fish and not shell fish, fish in season and fish out of season, big fish and little fish, fish edible and fish not edible. So out of the great sea of humanity the net of Christianity gathers men of all types of character and all states of morals.

The distinguishing note of Christianity is its universality. "The kingdom of heaven," said the Jew, "was for the Jew ; Gentile dogs were not to be admitted into it." "Nay," said Christ, "the kingdom is for all. I, the King, am the Son of Man, not simply a son of the Jews ; I am the Light of the World, not simply of Palestine. The laws of My kingdom are not minute and local, but universal and spiritual, fitted for all men through all time. My salvation is not for your sins only, but for the sins of the whole world. My teaching and work form a net, large and strong enough to be cast into the great sea of mankind and to catch there fish of every kind."

Our Bible, as a part of the net, is a fair example of this universality of the kingdom. The Chinese classics, or the Hindoo Vedas, gather, even among their own people, but a few readers, and they of the learned. When translated into our tongue they attract but a few scholarly or curious students. But

the Bible, translated into more than three hundred languages, gathers readers in every language, and gathers those readers out of every class. One generation after another is caught in the net or spell that the Book throws over them. So Christianity, in contrast with every other competing power, has this note of universality. Philosophy was for a class, and ever must be—the intellectual and educated; it scornfully passes by the non-intellectual. But Christianity gathers into its net both classes: its teaching on the great problems the intellectual cannot neglect, and its great human sympathy catches the non-intellectual. Beauty attracts those who have naturally the æsthetic sentiment and some leisure and means for its culture. Toynbee settlements and Kyrle societies have their use, but beauty alone cannot gather the poor and wretched, and those destitute of taste and means. Christianity, however, gathers all. The poetic beauty of its Book, the moral sublimity of its Person, the spiritual grandeur of its truths and its mystic touch, attract the æsthetic, while its provision for the primal needs of man and its abounding comfort and hope gather the poor and comfortless. Morality, duty, law, so stern and august, so severely pure, so really majestic, cast their net over the naturally good and morally earnest; but their net goes not deep enough to catch those whose consciences are seared, who are heartless and wicked. But Christianity, while it gathers the souls who have lived before God in all good

conscience, also nets the publicans and sinners, the depraved and vicious. And it is plain that the religions of the civilised heathen, if suitable for their own people for a period, are not suitable to all peoples through all time. The Eastern ideas and customs indissolubly bound up in such religions as Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism are altogether impossible to peoples of Western civilisation. But Christianity, while its birthplace is Eastern, has not in its doctrines or ordinances, precepts or services, anything whatever that renders it unsuitable to Eastern or Western, to Semitic or Aryan or Turanian. Our Christianity, as our Christ, belongs to no one people and to no one age, but to all peoples and to all ages. Its doctrine of God the Father and its condemnation of sin appeal to the universal heart and conscience. Its propitiation for sin and its hope of everlasting life catch the hope of man as man. Its uplifted Christ draws all men. The kingdom of God is like unto a drag-net that was cast into the sea and gathered of every kind. Then be not afraid, but by our Home and Foreign Missions cast the net into the sea and gather Hindoo and Chinese, Negro and Papuan, as well as English and German.

III.

The kingdom likened to a net suggests the third point, that one effective way of the kingdom securing subjects is by *entanglement* or *enclosure*.

The words of good George Herbert here present themselves—

“Lord with what care hast Thou begirt us round !
Parents first season us ; then schoolmasters
Deliver us to laws ; they send us bound
To rules of reason, holy messengers,
Pulpits and Sundays, sorrow dogging sin,
Afflictions sorted, anguish of all sizes,
Fine nets and stratagems to catch us in,
Bibles laid open, millions of surprises.
Blessings beforehand, ties of gratefulness,
The sound of glory ringing in our ears ;
Without, our shame ; within, our conscience,
Angels and grace, eternal hopes and fears.”

The experience of many of you will interpret this idea of entanglement. Without your choice and effort you have been, and are, girdled with Christian ideas and institutions. In your infancy God's name in baptism was placed upon you. The name of Christ has been woven into your earliest thoughts and mingled with your purest feelings. They in whom your life is bound up have ever been devoted to Christ ; your admiration and love of them cannot be separated from Christ, with whom they are one. The society into which you have grown up has been

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more or less Christian. Apart from your will, you are so associated with the Christian Church that you cannot easily neglect its services. The great questions of human life and destiny which interest you are inextricably bound up with Christianity. When you marry, Christianity in decided form claims connection with that supreme moment of your life. The solemn experience of birth in your household, the tender sanctity of motherhood or fatherhood, again bring around you Christian ideas and ordinances. Sometimes, it may be, you are not pleased that your life is so enclosed by Christianity ; you resent a little the restraint and entanglement. You may make some effort to break away ; but no, you find you are fairly encircled, netted. The yielding and almost invisible net you cannot easily break through ; you cannot get under it, for it drags the bottom ; you cannot get above, for it floats on the surface. After perhaps a little plunging, you feel it would cost too much really to break away ; for the present you will abide within the net, especially as there is now ample room for you to hold your own opinion and go your own way. By and by, however—and this may be the case with some of you just now—the net of Christianity draws in more closely upon you. In your soul arises solemn thought as to your sin and the future judgment ; a drawing to Christ is upon you. “ Am I right with God ? Am I really saved ? ” are questions that press. The net is closing upon you, impelling you on. You turn

here and there ; but, no, there is no getting away from these inward experiences. The net is closing upon you ; you are urged to make the great decision. Happy are ye if, instead of tossing and struggling to get away, you say, "Christ has caught me ; I yield ; I rejoice to be His."

IV.

"When the net was filled, they drew up on the beach ; and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but the bad they cast away." Here are the ideas of *manifestation and separation*.

In the water manifestation and separation are impossible, but when the net is drawn up on the beach all are manifest, and separation is easy. The net full of fish on the beach is a sight indeed. A great, varied, confused mass is there and much movement. Stones, mud, entangled weed mingle with the fish. Fishes of all sorts and sizes flounder about. Some big ugly fish, good for nothing, are there ; some fair-sized good fish, leaping, their scales flashing light ; and a large number of moderate-sized fishes, good and bad, all gaping and gasping. Even so while here in the present society, in this obscure element of time, we know each other very imperfectly. Weeds we take sometimes to be fish. Men who in their hearts reject Christ pass for average

Christians ; others who in secret lust or in covetousness are monsters, and others who in vanity or pride or selfishness are unwholesome, are here only known by a few, or are only now and then suspected to be what they really are. Of a great multitude more or less enclosed in the net of Christianity we all are ignorant. Yet in the net, while submerged in these waters of time, we see the gleam of some who are unmistakably good fish—men and women of sterling character ; and even here events sometimes bring, as it were, the fish to the surface : they are manifested, judged. “I thought he was better,” men say. Or they say, “We have been mistaken ; he is no good ; he is a queer fish.”

But, brethren, when by the irresistible power we are all drawn up out of this life on to the beach of the eternal land, where there is no more sea, what a manifestation and judgment. That air and light will at once reveal what manner of persons we are—worldling or Christian, unbeliever or believer, unjust or just. We shall be self-revealed. There will be no depth for us to dive down into where the eye cannot follow. Godly and ungodly, virtuous and vicious, will then be as visibly different as on the beach are the foul, disgusting fish from the clean, wholesome fish. As now to God, so then to self and others, there will be no creature that is not manifest ; all things will be naked and open. “There is nothing hid which shall not be manifested, neither is there anything kept secret but that it shall come abroad.”

“When the net was filled, they drew up on the beach ; and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but the bad they cast away. So shall it be in the end of the world ; the angels shall come forth and sever the wicked from among the just.”

THE UNMERCIFUL SERVANT

BY REV. ALFRED ROWLAND, D.D., LL.B.

THE UNMERCIFUL SERVANT

DIVINE COMPASSION REFLECTED FROM HUMAN HEARTS

“Shouldst not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow-servant, even as I had pity on thee?”—MATTHEW xviii. 33.

THE special form of compassion referred to here is forgiveness. The parable was given in answer to Peter's question, “Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him, until seven times?” and Jesus answered, “Until seventy times seven.” It is no wonder that teaching like this, which opposed all precedent and defied natural instinct, needed repetition, illustration, and enforcement, in order to make it unmistakably clear to the Church that our Lord meant it to be a practical law of life. There is no disciple who does not require the same persistent and patient setting before him of this ideal at which we are all steadfastly to aim. The truth is that if we are kind to some one who has no special claim on us, or to some one who has never done us a good turn and is never likely to do so, we are serenely satisfied with ourselves, and

think that it is unreasonable to expect that such kindness should also be done to those who have actually wronged us. We have the idea, which Peter also had, that we have a natural right to vengeance, and are therefore entitled to some credit if we give up that right. Our Lord teaches us that we have no such right at all, that if we have asked for and accepted Divine forgiveness we have therein implicitly pledged ourselves to forgive others.

It was in order to make this duty more clear that He narrated the parable before us, which sets forth the fulness and freeness of Divine forgiveness as a type of what we are to show in our little sphere, although our pardoning grace must be infinitely smaller in degree, because the greatest offence against us when compared with our offence against God is as one hundred pence to ten thousand talents, as a drop to the ocean.

For the first time Jesus speaks in this parable of God as our King, whose servants we are, to whom we are responsible, and whose will is our law. He alludes here not to the day of judgment, but to those times in our experience when the question of our debt, the realisation of our sin, is brought home to us, times when awakened conscience brings us into the King's presence and makes us realise that our sins are so great that we can only cast ourselves on His mercy. If we have known this experience, if we have heard His voice saying, "Thy sins are forgiven thee," if we have risen from prayer with the

joy which Christian had when he felt the burden roll off as he knelt at the Cross, we have understood what Jesus meant when He said, "Then the Lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him and forgave him the debt."

"Now," says the Lord, "if this is so with you, if you dwell in the kingdom of grace, you must show grace ; if you are forgiven you must forgive ; if you have found love you must exercise love ; if you live by compassion you must display compassion. Whatever others may do, you are not to push your rights as far as you can, you are not to exact the utmost from those dependent upon you, or else, according to Divine law, retribution will come. "With what measure ye mete it shall be measured to you again." It has been truly said by Lord Herbert, "He who cannot forgive others breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass, for every man has need to be forgiven."

It is not our intention to dwell simply on this one phase of compassion. Our Lord here lays down as a general principle that what God has been to us, that, in our infinitely lower sphere, we ought to be to others ; and this is only possible in proportion as we live in the consciousness of the Divine love and pity to ourselves. If it is true that we are to show compassion to those who have wronged us, who are our debtors or our foes, far more should we display it to those who have done us no harm.

Now the difficulties in the way of obedience to

this law are immense. They will necessitate a perfect martyrdom to any who would live in loyalty to Christ, in defiance of the prejudices and habits of modern society. The higher law demands of us a higher life, and the higher life demands a purer atmosphere, the very breath of heaven itself, which is only to be found on the heights of communion with God. A well known fact in physiology may illustrate this. The air which has passed through your lungs and has lost four or five per cent. of its oxygen, will yield very little of the oxygen left in it when you breathe it again, and if you continue to use it till you are almost suffocated the air will still contain about ten per cent. of oxygen, that is, nearly half its original quantity. The air, in fact, is then so much vitiated that you, with your higher life, cannot breathe it any longer, but frogs and reptiles and molluscs can live in it still, and they breathe and absorb oxygen almost as long as there is any left. This law holds good in other realms too, and because so many nominal Christians have only the lower life they can still live contentedly in the vitiated atmosphere of modern society. We need that our sluggish souls should be so quickened that we must demand the higher atmosphere, redolent of purity and love, in which obedience to heavenly law shall be not only possible but natural.

It would be easy to see that true compassion to men finds its source in the compassion of God, and is proportioned to the intensity with which this is

realised and enjoyed. It was a true utterance which fell from the lips of the Psalmist when he looked up to God and said, "All my springs are in Thee." This river is full when its channel is clear, because it depends not on the tiny springs of human pitifulness rising here and there in ebullitions of emotion, but it depends, as the Nile does, on a vast reservoir high up far out of sight, among the everlasting hills. If God's compassion flows freely to us, it should flow freely through us to others.

Divine compassion is shown in various ways.

I.

It appears in pardon given to transgressors.

This is specially exemplified in the parable before us. The king freely forgives his servant that enormous debt, not because he thought he would repay him by and by, but because he knew that he could never repay him, and that he was utterly hopeless and undone. This fully represents the greatness of God's pardoning love to us. Our sins have been far more numerous than we think. Even in our times of deepest conviction, when the sense of guilt has weighed us down and almost crushed us, we were still far from realising all our offences ; many were forgotten, many were of such a subtle kind that we hardly thought there was sinfulness in

them, and others had not been translated into act or word and were not of the concrete kind which we could easily apprehend. But He, who is the Searcher of hearts, knew about these. None were overlooked, none of their aggravations were forgotten, they were all written in the record of the Eternal Mind ; yet when we were really penitent and confessed our guilt, and cast ourselves upon His mercy, and pleaded the atoning work of Jesus Christ, He said, "I have blotted out as a thick cloud thy transgressions and as a cloud thy sins."

If we are vividly conscious of this forgiveness how can we judge our fellows as hardly as we do ? They have vexed and offended us—true ; but their offences are only as the hundred pence to the ten thousand talents. They have broken God's laws and have got themselves into trouble through their drunkenness, or dishonesty, or indulgence—yes, but were our forgiven offences any more excusable, considering the helps and advantages we had from childhood ? Will not our pardoning God be able justly to ask about some whom we loudly condemn, "Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow-servant, even as I had pity on thee ?"

We are harder to one another than God is to any one of us. Therefore, in spite of our sinfulness, let us draw near with confidence to the Throne of Grace. We need make no excuses. God is already reconciled to us through the death of His Son, and He only waits for us to be reconciled to Him. He

is in Christ, not imputing men's iniquities unto them. And if we have the intense consciousness of this pardoning love, we may become new men with new responsibilities towards our fellow-servants.

II.

God's compassion is shown in His goodness to the unthankful.

It may be one of our duties hereafter to recall, by the power of an awakened memory, mercies which came plentifully and were little regarded. Our griefs loom more largely on our horizon than our joys. We think more of a thunderstorm than of a spell of sunny weather. Hence some of the expressions of gratitude which ring out from the Psalms and from our hymns, appear to us exaggerated, though in truth they are inadequate. If we try in the evening, when alone with God, to recall the mercies of a week which has closed—mercies which affected us physically, mentally, and spiritually, those which came in journeying, and those which visited us during rest, those which cheered us in business and those which gladdened us at home—it will not be long before we are able to repeat with full hearts the familiar verse—

“ Lord when I count Thy mercies o’er,
They strike me with surprise,
Not all the sands that spread the shore
To equal numbers rise.”

Yet how little recognition there has been on our part of this constant goodness! How small the return! How lacking the desert!

It was probably their recognition of this which made the apostles so like their Lord, who went about doing good. Their works of mercy were miracles of pity as well as of power. The cripple they healed at the Gate of the Temple was a professional beggar such as we think it least wise to help. The demoniac girl in Philippi, whom Paul, in God's name, rescued from thralldom, was one who had followed him that very day with words of scorn. But these men forgave as they had been forgiven, blessed as they had been blessed, and it is to this that we also are summoned. No one knows how hard it is to be kind to the unworthy till it has been attempted. For example, a Christian lady meets a fallen sister, and wins her consent to leave her evil courses. She takes her into her home, hears her pitiful story, tends and loves her for Christ's sake. What is her reward? The discovery that the girl's tale is false, that her penitence is a sham, that at the first opportunity she will return to evil ways. Then the devil whispers, "What reward have you?" Well, the only reward as yet is that whatever the effect on the sinner, the sister who tried to save her has that joy of which our Lord spoke when He said, "You shall be the children of your Father which is in heaven, for He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust."

III.

God shows His compassion further in giving health to the weak.

He helps them to help themselves. This is the truest kind of help, and should always be our aim, but it requires more effort than many are disposed to make. If your child comes home at night with a hard lesson to do, it would be easiest to you just to run off a translation and tell him the meaning of each word, but wisdom tells you never to do that. You sit down by him, give him hints and helps, and let him use them, until by slow degrees he finds his own way through his difficulties, and soon can do without your help because he has learned to use his own powers. That is the Divine principle. For example, when you have a temptation to resist, God prompts you to right thought about it and stirs you to resistance, but you must resist, and only if your resolute will be exercised will you overcome the evil. Thus with your doubts—you are right to pray over them, but they will not all disappear in a burst of supernatural sunshine, but through prayer you will gain the consciousness that God is, that God is near, that He is loving you, and then you will face your difficulties, either to see that they are beyond settlement here, belonging rather to the heavenly life, and will be content to wait, or

else by your fidelity to what you do know, you will win the blessedness of him who fought his doubts and gathered strength.

Let all help that you give to others be of this kind. For example, it is easy work to give a shilling to a case of distress, and sometimes we do that because we do not really know what else to do ; but it will be more difficult, yet more Christlike, to look into each case thoroughly, to try and find work for one, to get clothing for another, to send this one into service and that one into a reformatory, to apply your own shrewdness and common sense to a home where there has been little of either, and to help one case right through instead of doing so little for several as to afford no real help to any.

IV.

God shows His compassion in inspiring hope in those who are despondent.

This we also may do by our presence and love without any gift of money, and sometimes all the better because we cannot give money, and are manifestly unable to afford it. The world probably owes its best men to obscure people who inspired them with hope about themselves. Take John's influence over Simon Peter as an example. After Peter had denied his Lord with oaths and curses, I

can imagine that some of the brethren would argue very confidently against receiving him back into fellowship ; others, more Christlike, would urge that at least they should wait until he came of his own free will and asked to be re-admitted, acknowledging his sin. John, however, was ready to answer the question in our text, " Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow-servant, even as I had pity on thee ? " He made his way to Peter's side, and one can imagine how, as they walked up and down, Peter would say, " No, I have sinned too deeply " ; while John would urge " But think of His love ; remember His look. His mercy endureth for ever." This would be Peter's first step back to the Lord, and up to the throne on which he has ever since sat, judging the tribes of Israel. Would it not be a glorious and Christlike work for each of us to bring home one of the banished ones for whom the Father's heart is yearning ? There are some in despair about their future—they are so helpless that they cannot make an effort for themselves and others unless we inspire them—perhaps they have sinned so deeply and so long that they are reckless and defiant. It is no use to scold them, or to preach to them, but if we love them for Christ's sake we may save them. We should take them by the hand as a strong brother or a pure sister may do, and encourage them to arise and return to their Father. Then with His help they may go on in the growing sunshine of

His love. God has been good and patient to us, let us be good and patient to them. Remember the solemn words which this parable exemplifies, "He shall have judgment without mercy that hath showed no mercy."

It is by thus reflecting God's compassion, not by talking about it, that we shall convince the world of the truth of that glorious couplet :—

Infinite goodness hath such ample arms
That it receives whatever comes to it.

THE LABOURERS IN THE VINE-
YARD

BY REV. J. G. GREENHOUGH, M.A.

THE LABOURERS IN THE VINE- YARD

"These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day. But he answered one of them, and said Friend, I do thee no wrong ; didst not thou agree with me for a penny?"—MATTHEW xx. 12, 13.

THE main figures of this parable call for little or no explanation. The vineyard is the service to which Christ calls men. The Lord of the vineyard is the Master Himself, and the evening hour is the time of final judgment and reward. So far, all is clear. The difficulty comes at the close, when the labourers are put on an equal footing, and the same coin, not a penny but about a shilling, given to those who have wrought but an hour and to those who have toiled from sunrise to sunset. Of course, on the face of it, the thing was unjust—twelve hours work may reasonably claim more wages than one hour—at least we should say that in the ordinary market ; and we are inclined to sympathise with the murmurers. It is true they got all that they bargained for and originally expected, but when

they saw the master's large generosity to the late comers they naturally looked for proportionate generosity to themselves. It is very likely that we should have done the same, and we are not surprised that they took their shilling without effusive gratitude. And yet it needs but little thought to see the Saviour's meaning, and especially if we read the parable in the light of what had gone before. The key to it, of course, is found in the preceding chapter, where the disciples had been boasting of their faithful service and their many sacrifices, and representing themselves as entitled to some great reward. It was only just, they intimated, that they should be well paid who had been the first to follow Him, and borne hardships for Him throughout; and Jesus wished to show them that the thing was not quite so evident as they supposed; that there might be others even more deserving than they who had not had their opportunities, and that the spirit in which they made their claim was not beautiful in His eyes and not worthy of the highest service.

The main lesson of the parable is this, that the great Master looks not only to the duration of the labour and the quantity of work got through, but also to the measure of opportunity and the spirit in which the work is done.

I.

First the Master would have us know that there is a higher justice than earthly courts and earthly paymasters can recognise.

We pay wages according to the hours actually spent in work ; we do not usually reward those who have been doing nothing, though they may possibly be as deserving as the others. We could not do it without doing incalculable mischief. It would be putting a premium on laziness, and making a paradise for tramps. Human justice cannot take the will for the deed, because it can never be certain that the will was present. It can only judge by the deed. But the Greater Judge, who reads the intents of the heart, is under no such limitations. He sees what men would have done if their chances had been equal to their willingness, and He pays accordingly.

Those late comers had been idle all the day, but it was not because they wished to be idle ; they were really seeking work, and were not like the vagrants who are always talking about work, and always bent on living without it. And there are few things more pitiable than a man honestly crying out for work, and eating his heart out because no one will set him on. These men came as soon as they were called ; if they had been called at sunrise they would have responded as eagerly as they did

in the eleventh hour. It was the fault of circumstances, or the overstocking of the labour market, that had kept them tossing their heels in useless wretchedness when their hearts were pining and their hands praying for employment; and He who judges not as man judges, looked as kindly on them when the pay hour came as on the more privileged ones who had been fortunate enough to get the early call. That is Heaven's justice, and there are few of us who will not say that is true, sweet, perfect justice.

And this thought has many applications, some of which we hardly dare follow because they lead us too deep into the world's mysteries and the mysteries of a judgment to come. But think how many souls there are to whom the highest call is never given. They would be capable of doing good work—yes, Christ's own work, and willing to do it if they knew how; and they waste their lives sitting in the very darkness, sighing for they know not what, because no voice has summoned them and no light shown them the way. There are those who might be saints in every group of gutter children; there is stuff of which prophets could be made in every heap of human refuse; there are mighty possibilities slumbering and half dead in thousands of degraded natures which the touch of the Son of God has not awakened.

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
The dark, unfathomed caves of ocean bear;
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

Labourers idle in the market to whom the call has never been given, surely for them there will be the Master's higher justice when the final reckoning comes. It is ours to give the call to as many as we can, and leave the rest for Him to settle with.

Moreover, think how many there are, even of Christian men and women, whose will to serve is far larger than their ability and opportunity. Their sympathies are Christlike : they are full of pity for their fellow men, and all on fire with devotion to the Saviour of their souls. There is not a labour which they would not undertake, not a cross which they would not bear at His bidding, if the chance, and the call, and the equipment were given them. They see a hundred evil things which they would like to cope with. Sorrows to be healed, sick to be nursed, lost souls to be recovered, mission fields demanding labourers, Christ's army clamouring for stout recruits, and they have the will and heart to do a thousand things. But the opening is not for them. Possibly they have not the gifts, or all their time and energy are chained down to the drudgery of common duties. Some of them are invalids ; some are too poor to give more than the widow's mite. They sigh, and pine, and fret because they cannot do the thing they would. They hear the preacher talking about idle Christians. He does not mean the words for them, but they take it to themselves, and whip themselves with needless lashes because they are not busy in the vineyard which is closed against them. There

are many such, in whom the spirit is abundantly willing but the flesh is weak, or there is no open door, or no call to the *work* which they would like to do. And to them this parable speaks, and says : Do what you can. Fill your little spheres with Christian witness ; give the Lord one-twelfth of the work which it is in your heart to give Him, if it were possible, and you, too, will come in for the higher justice. He will not weigh your work in too exacting scales ; He will not measure by results, but by the spirit of willingness. And He will not fail to pay you full wages when the evening comes, and make you equal to those who have accomplished far more, but deserved no more, perhaps even deserved less.

II.

For that is the second thought in the parable : That the higher justice regards and makes much of the spirit in which service is undertaken and carried on, and the motives which actuate it and inspire it.

Peter had been asking, What are our wages to be ? He had his eye on the wages. We have left all and followed Thee ; what are we to have for all this sacrifice ? He might have remembered that the Master had left a great deal more ; that the Master had suffered, and was going to suffer incalculably more. But that thought did not occur to him ; he

was too intent upon the wages, and that was not the way in which the best work gets done. Those labourers who came early to the field came with Peter's question on their lips; they took care to strike a bargain before they did a stroke of work. They agreed with the master for a penny a day. They brought with them the spirit of the shop and the atmosphere of the market, and probably not of the most honest market. They were not so much concerned to give a fair day's work for a fair day's pay as to do as little work as possible for the wages which had been fixed. In that condition of mind they laboured all the day, with no real heart in the service, but with hands itching to hold the money; doing their poor bit of work to the ring of coin and not to the music of love: doing it all, therefore, sluggishly and shabbily, wearying of it as they did it, sick to get it over and receive the pay.

Now those who came in the later hours asked no questions, and made no bargain. They were anxious to be employed, and they trusted him who called them. They knew that he would give them what was right, and left it to his generous judgment. And the hours which they toiled, whether few or many, were inspired by earnest devotion. There was no fretting and worrying about wages to steal the fine glow from the face of service, and to clog the feet of labour with the chain of calculation. And they did their work heartily, rejoicing in it, and waiting without weariness for the time when the

master would reward them as seemed good to him. I warrant their work was better done, and there was far more of it in proportion to the time spent than the work of the others.

Of course in the ordinary workshop we naturally ask what the wages are to be. It is not always safe to trust the earthly master without an agreement. Yet even there the work is poorly done if it is all done to the jingling tune of wages. If there is no other motive, there is no spring in the feet, no deft quickness in the hands. The man who has nothing but wages in view never honestly earns his wages. There must be some pride in his work ; there must be some respect and love for the master whom he is serving ; there must be an anxiety to do it well and a spirit that does it willingly, or the work will not bear close inspection in the evening.

And the parable does not deal with an ordinary workshop. It is drawing us a picture of the higher service, and showing us what that ought to be ; and there the spirit and the motive are everything. If a man only serves God for the sake of what God will pay him, I do not think that man will either do any great good on earth or win a particularly high place in heaven. If a man goes to church because on the whole it pays, helps him in his business, gives him a certificate of respectability, the Church at the end of the year may be richer by a few coppers, but I do not think that God will look upon that particular church-goer as deserving of any special reward in the end.

Nay, if we follow Christ and confess Him before the world, and endure loss and bear crosses for Him merely to gain the crowns and rewards which are laid up in the heavenly places, I do not think that He who bought us for Himself with His own blood will be mightily proud of our services. It is not the master who inspires us then, but the master's wages. And He would rather that we should love Him for Himself than wait upon Him dog-like for what we expect Him to give. Of course we can never forget the far off reward, the evening time and the reaping of the golden harvest; that is part of our religion. But he is a very languid and unprofitable Christian who has always his thoughts on that. The servants who serve Him best are those who serve Him mainly because of what He has been to them and done for them; serve Him for the blood drops which He has shed, and the love which has given them everything; serve Him because it is so good to labour where He has laboured, and so sweet to have received; and as to what comes after, that will be all which we hope for, and a great deal more. We can confidently leave that with Him.

THE LABOURERS IN THE VINE-
YARD

BY REV. GEORGE MILLIGAN, B.D.

THE LABOURERS IN THE VINE- YARD

MATTHEW XX. 1-16.

THIS parable is unquestionably a difficult one, and there are probably few readers who do not rise from its perusal without the feeling that some of the labourers were unfairly treated. It seems a little hard, to say the least, that the men who had borne the burden and heat of the day should find their services rewarded exactly to the same extent as those who had worked but one hour. It was not to be expected, they say, that they should not grumble; we would have done exactly the same ourselves.

Nor, it must be confessed, do some of the ordinary explanations go far towards removing the difficulty, as that the first hired labourers received what had been promised them, or that the master had a perfect right to do what he liked with his own. All that, no doubt, is true, and has, as we shall see afterwards, its own place in the interpretation of the parable. But we want some-

thing more—to discover, if possible, some principle by which the master was guided, and which will remove from his conduct all suspicion of ungenerous dealings towards any of his servants. And it ought to help us in doing this, if we try to discover exactly what were the particular circumstances which called forth the parable, and what, therefore, was the special lesson it was intended to teach.

Just before, it will be noticed, a young ruler had come to Jesus, eager to know how he might inherit eternal life. And Jesus had laid upon him the hard test: "*If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow Me*" (c. xix. 21). But the test had proved too exacting; and, as the young man turned sorrowfully away, our Lord had taken the opportunity of pointing out how hardly shall a rich man or, as it is expressed more mildly elsewhere, the man that trusts in riches (Mark x. 24), enter into the kingdom of heaven.

The words were evidently intended to be perfectly general, but to the Apostles they immediately suggested the thought that those who, like themselves, had literally left homes and friends and lands for Jesus' sake must be peculiarly meritorious. And so, acting as their spokesman, Peter exclaimed in his blunt, impetuous way, "*Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed Thee; what shall we have*

therefore ?" And how did Jesus answer ? First of all He recognized freely the sacrifices that the disciples had made, and gave them the assurance that none of these would be found to have been made in vain ; but at the same time He took occasion to rebuke in the strongest terms the bargaining spirit they had displayed. "*What shall we have therefore ?*" Peter had asked, as if that were the main thing. So much sacrifice, so much reward : so much given up for Christ here, so much enjoyed with Christ hereafter. But so to argue, Jesus implied, was to cut at the very root of all true sacrifice and service. Love and trust were of their very essence. And the disciples might discover that many who, like themselves, were "*first*" in being called, in the outward importance of their work were in reality no more deserving of reward, perhaps not so much so, as those who might seem to be "*last*," but whose service, though short and imperfect, was at least free and willing and loving. It is the spirit in which the work is done—and here we have reached the point of view of which we have been in search—rather than its actual amount, that is of supreme importance in the sight of God. "*For*"—and notice the connecting "*for*," linking the parable as an illustration to the truth as just here declared—"the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a householder," and so on.

It is unnecessary to recall the parable in detail. But the two points which are of special importance

as bringing out its leading truth are the manner in which the labourers were hired, and the manner in which they were paid at the close of the day.

As regards the first point, the manner of the hiring, when the master went to the market-place in the early morning he would doubtless find plenty of labourers to choose from. But the hiring would not therefore be necessarily easy. The men would recognize their own value and importance; they would see that they were still in a position to make their own terms, and that if they did not like the look of one master, or were not satisfied with what he offered, they would easily find better terms elsewhere. And so, as the parable is careful to point out, it was as the result of a distinct agreement, a definite bargain, that at length they engaged themselves.

But at the later hours of the day it was different. Those who had not yet found work were now eager to get it. And when accordingly a master came along with the proposal, "*Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you,*" they took him at once at his word and went, thankful for having received work at all, and sure that in the long run the master would deal fairly with them. They went—so the contrast between them and the first hired has been pointedly drawn—"humble, trusting, and grateful; the others went proud, self-confident, mercenary." ¹

¹ Prof. Marcus Dods.

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And this same difference of spirit that marked the hiring reappeared once more when the time for payment came at the close of the day. It was the last hired who were the first paid, and though they had wrought but one hour, they to their amazement received a full day's wages. And that can only have been, not because they had done as much in their one hour as the others in twelve—there is not the slightest hint of that in the parable—but because they had made such good use of their one hour, and worked so zealously and cheerfully in it, that the master was only too glad to show his appreciation of their services by what on simply business principles would have been an extravagant amount of pay.

It is a generosity with which we can readily sympathize. Everyone knows the pleasure there is in rewarding as far as he properly can cheerfully rendered, unselfish, uncalculating service. Whereas when he finds a disposition on the part of his employees to be always bargaining with him, to have everything laid down in black and white on certain hard and fast conditions, why, he accepts them on their own terms and sticks to these. That at least was what the first hired in our parable found. What they had bargained for they received, neither less nor more. And their murmuring against the householder for his generous treatment of their companions was only another proof of the hireling spirit that ruled in their hearts. They had

no real interest in the work itself. They had engaged themselves simply for the pay. And instead of being glad to think of the longer service they had been privileged to perform, and sympathizing with those who, perhaps through no fault of their own, had come in so late, they were discontented and envious.

Such, then, is the parable ; and if we have understood it rightly we should have little difficulty in finding here a threefold lesson for ourselves—(1) a call to service ; (2) a reminder of the spirit in which all our service should be offered ; and (3) a promise of the reward with which our service will be crowned.

I.

We have here a call to service.

“Why stand ye here all the day idle?” God is still saying to all who have not yet entered His vineyard. And the very fact that it was up to the eleventh hour that this call was continued, when the day’s work was practically over, and it might well seem absurd to be bringing in extra help, is in itself a proof that He does not wish any one to be left out.

No one of us at least can put forward the plea that *“no man has hired us,”* or that no call has been addressed to us. Rather, when we think of all the privileges that have been showered upon us, and

the opportunities that have been placed within our reach, we may well feel ashamed at the little use we have so often made of them.

It would be to misunderstand the spirit of the parable altogether to imagine that it lends any encouragement to the idea that it does not much matter *when* we enter into the Lord's service. No doubt a late entrance is better than none at all. But a true service ought to last all our lives. It is our best and freshest energies that God requires, and not merely the fragments that remain over after days and years spent in idleness and self-seeking.

There is a touching little poem by Dora Greenwell, suggested by the inscription on a tombstone in Wales, which tells how the man who lies there passed away at the age of eighty, and yet, referring to the date of his entering God's service, was only "four years old when he died."

"If you ask me how long I have lived in the world, I'm
old, I'm very old ;

If you ask me how many years I've lived, it'll very soon
be told :

Past eighty years of age, yet only four years old."

Oh ! how long are you going to be in the world
before you begin to live ? "*Why stand ye here all
the day idle ?*"

II.

We are the more encouraged to obey God's call, because, as we have been seeing, it is the spirit rather than the amount of our service that God regards.

Many people's great difficulty in thinking of serving God is that they feel that there is nothing great or heroic that they can attempt, and so they lose the humble opportunities which each recurring day brings with it. But "*if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not*" (2 Cor. viii. 12). And if God sometimes denies us the larger spheres of service after which we long, this should only make us the more earnest and faithful in the performance of the work that is lying right before us.

"Do the work that's nearest,
Though it's dull at times,
Helping, when we meet them,
Lame dogs over stiles."¹

Our Lord Himself has taught us that "*he that is faithful in a very little*"—he that turns to the best possible account the little time, the little opportunities within his reach—"*is faithful also in much.*" (Luke xvi. 10). He is preparing himself already for the higher glory that will one day be his.

¹ Charles Kingsley.

III.

For, lastly, the parable reminds us of the abundant reward with which all true service in God's kingdom will be crowned.

That may seem, perhaps, to be introducing something of the bargaining spirit against which all along we have been warned. But at the same time no one can shut his eyes to the large place which reward in connection with God's service occupies in our Lord's teaching (see Matt. v. 7, 12; vi. i.; x. 32). And, after all, what can show better than the treatment of the eleventh-hour labourers that the rewards which God bestows are the result, not of our own exertions, but of His free, loving, bountiful goodness? At best we are but "*unprofitable*" servants, and yet it is "*good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over,*" that is measured out to us (Luke vi. 38).

While, then, we are not to do our work for the sake of reward, we may well look forward to that reward as a help and encouragement which God Himself has provided. It was "*for the joy that was set before Him,*" that our Lord "*endured the cross, despising the shame*" (Heb. xii. 2). And if only our service is offered in the right spirit, there is no one, however forgotten and despised he may be in the sight of men, but shall one day hear the Master's own voice saying to him: "*Well done,*

thou good and faithful servant, thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy Lord" (Matt. xxv. 21).

THE TWO SONS

BY REV. J. G. GREENHOUGH, M.A.



THE TWO SONS

"A certain man had two sons ; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work to-day in my vineyard. He answered and said, I will not : but afterward he repented, and went. And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I *go*, sir : and went not. Whether of them twain did the will of *his* father ?" &c.—MATTHEW xxi. 28-32.

THE men to whom our Lord spoke this parable were pillars of religion and orthodoxy, sanctimonious priests and Pharisees—men who made long prayers and made great professions of holiness, who were always talking about good works and doing ill works, always making a boast of their strict obedience to God's laws, and in their secret lives and hearts breaking every one of them. And our Lord drew this parable picture to show them what God thought of their hollow pretensions, and to let them know that the very publicans and harlots were not quite so far from heaven as they.

But we need not dwell on that particular application of the figure. The Saviour's parables had always a meaning far beyond the occasion and the persons which suggested them. There is a certain universality about them ; they belong to every age,

they are pictures of humanity at large; they are mirrors in which each man to-day may, if he will, see his own face. I observe—

I.

That these two sons are quite typical or representative figures.

Their counterparts are always to be found. Possibly we have them in our own homes, and certainly we meet with them in every class and condition of men. They are presented here as children of the same parents, but with very little in common except the family name. One of them is saucy, headstrong, defiant, with a will of his own not easily curbed. He does not take to your moulding and shaping like a piece of clay. He rebels and kicks more like a high-spirited horse that needs a great deal of breaking in. He tells you ten or twenty times a day that he will do as he pleases, and not as you please, and he does and says a great many things which are by no means pleasing to you. His mother prays for him somewhat fearfully, and does a little crying at times also, for he is terribly trying and looks like going to the bad. And yet there is downright good stuff in him. His worst is on the surface. His disobedience is more bravado than real badness. He rather enjoys your nervous fear for him, and plays upon your anxiety by talking big, bold things; but he does

not mean half that he says, and is not nearly so graceless as he would have you believe. He flouts you to your face, but in his heart he has a real affection for you. He pretends to laugh at your warnings, but he feels them and remembers them. He is really sorry that he spoke the insolent word, especially when he sees the touch of moisture in your eyes, and he goes out penitent and quietly does your bidding, though at first he told you bluntly and rudely that he would not do it. There is many a youth like that who grows out of his unruly and vexatious ways into a life of solid goodness and faithful duty.

The other son never gives a rude, defiant answer. His lips are like honey. He falls in at once with all your wishes and assents to all your proposals. Whatever you ask him to do he accepts with the most cheerful acquiescence. He is lavish of promises. He is a perfect model of submission and obedience so far as appearance goes. He never gives a mother the least trouble until she finds out that he is not to be trusted ; that he is one thing to her face and another thing when she is out of sight. You discover that fair and false is the rule of his life ; that he either speedily forgets what he promised to do, or gave you the promise never intending to fulfil it. And these lives which talk good things and never do them leave only heartache, and perhaps a little heartbreak, in their track.

And now you can see at a glance that these two sons have their representatives in wider spheres. They are found particularly in the religious world. There are some who tell us straight out that they do not intend to be Christians. They meet all our appeals with a determined and sometimes almost insolent refusal. They are not going to bind themselves by a religious profession, or cut themselves off from the enjoyments which they love by assuming a sanctity which they do not care for. Possibly they have their doubts about the Christian creed. They are not quite sure of its authority; their minds are hesitating and groping in the dark, or, what is even more probable, they have not been greatly impressed by the lives of Christian people. They have known some whose speech and conduct were not pre-eminently attractive. They have revolted from the unreality and hypocrisy of it, and the revolt carries them to the other extreme. They avoid that hypocrisy by indulging in the opposite kind of hypocrisy. Instead of trying to appear better than they are, they take pains to appear worse. They will speak scornfully of religion when in their hearts they respect it. They will boast to you that they are not Christians when in fact they are not far from the kingdom of God. They believe far more than they confess. Their actions are better than the creed of their lips. They live honourable lives. They think noble thoughts. They are always saying, "I go not," but then repent and go.

And there are others who are ready to take up the Christian name and profession without hesitation. They need no urgent persuasion. They have never any fight with doubt, never any difficulty about creed or commandment. They accept the Scriptures. They say amen to all good words and prayers. They glide into the Church as easily and smoothly as a pleasure boat on a summer pool. They repeat all its confessions and vows with as little trouble as they would eat their breakfast. And the big solemn reality of it has never taken hold of them at all. It is never more to them than a decent suit of clothes. It is not a spirit and a life; they call themselves religious, but religious in the deep, true sense they are not. No one feels the atmosphere morally sweeter where they are; no one is raised or inspired by contact with them; no one gets any satisfaction out of their Christian lives except themselves. No one finds in their lives a real witness of Jesus Christ. They are the people of all others who make the world suspect the Church and hold aloof from it. They give religion a bad odour, and the Church would be infinitely better off without them. They are the men and women who say to the Master, "I go, sir," and they go not. And they are in many respects further from God than the more conscientious of the unbelieving. "Whether of these twain did the will of his father?" and the answer must still be, as of old, "I suppose the first."

II.

What was our Lord's real estimate of these two types ?

Do not suppose that He approved of either of them. He was only showing that He hated hypocrisy above all things, and that the sinner in the dress of a saint was more offensive to Him than the sinner who made no pretension to be a saint. It was only a matter of comparison. But neither of these two sons was beautiful in His eyes. The rude answer of the first was irreverent, ungrateful, brutal, and altogether wicked. Whatever right thing he did afterwards was no excuse for that contemptuous "I will not," and for the pain which it inflicted on the father's heart. That was cruel and wrong, only less wrong than the glib lie on the lips of the other.

And that is a sin which is often passed over with a laugh. A man openly declares that he is not one of the goody-good and religious sort ; that he does not go to church and say long prayers, and that kind of thing. He does not profess to be better than he is, like some of those long-faced, sanctimonious people. He makes a boast of it. And people of the lewd and profane sort will pet and flatter him, and say what an honest fellow he is at heart, far better than the majority of those who profess a great deal more ;

there is no humbug or cant or hypocrisy about him. He shows no false colours ; but lets it be plainly known what he is. And he is immensely proud of that solitary virtue. He make it cover a multitude of sins. And yet, surely, it is a very small matter for a man to boast of, that he has not added to his other sins the sin of hypocrisy. A man may be without the Pharisee's phylactery and yet be very offensive in the sight of God. He may cover up a great many evil things with the rough garb of honesty as well as with the smooth and dainty robe of the false professor. Men who are always telling us that they are just as good as, and perhaps a great deal better than those smooth-tongued, psalm-singing Christians, protest so much that you have good reason to suspect them. They are not nearly so straight as they would have you believe. I should not like to look into their hearts or their secret lives. It would not be an edifying peep-show. Perhaps there is more hypocrisy in their lives than they would admit. Besides, is not the very contemptuous disavowal of religion about as big a sin as a man can commit ? Where a man says deliberately in the face of His Father, God, " I will not ; I will not acknowledge Thee, or pray to Thee, or worship or give thanks, or believe in Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent," that man is pretty far gone in blindness and hardness of heart. He cannot go much further unless he gives himself to the foulest

and grossest sins. Surely if there is any truth in religion at all, if there is any truth in the revelation of God's fatherhood, if we are His children and He cares for us and pities and loves, and has a wonderfully kind heart towards each one, if it is true that He became incarnate for us in Jesus and made that sacrifice of Calvary for our sins and sought to draw us by the cords of His dying love under His saving power—if all that is true there cannot be a much greater sin than for a man to meet it all with a bold "I will not," to refuse its obligations, and push it aside as if he could do as he pleased. If a man believes at all in a loving God and in Jesus Christ His Son, he is bound by the most urgent duty to pray, to be a Christian, and to make himself known as a Christian, to carry the Christian colours and to call himself by Jesus' name. And if he refuses to do that he repudiates the great obligation that can be put upon him. He is guilty of ingratitude, irreverence—nay, even dishonesty. And whatever his life may be in other respects, he has that big sin to answer for. And I would rather not have that sin laid to my account in the great day of trial. It must be a terrible thing to say, "I will not," when the great lover and Saviour of our souls entreats us. What if you are no worse than you seem. It is quite bad enough to seem what you are if you flout God to His face, and tell Him that His truth and redeeming love are things which you can do without.

As for the other son and Christ's sterner condemnation of him, there is little need to add weak human words to those terrible words of censure which fell from the Master's lips. If we are the Master's true servants we shall hate the falseness of the unworthy professor as He did. If the world outside pretends to have a horror of hypocrisy and sham saints, and flings its satire upon them, the real lover of the Lord Jesus holds them in far greater abomination. He knows how they they grieve and wound the Saviour's heart, and would like to purge the Church from the defilement that they bring. Every day if we are honest Christians we remember this and many another solemn warning which the Lord uttered against unreality, against professions which had no inner life of devotion, against those who called Him Lord, Lord, and made no effort to do His will. And every time we pray in secret we ask for help to live more nearly as we pray. We say make us true in heart as well as in act, in thought as well as in word, in our most hidden life as well as in Church communion, and in the open world. Let us be sincere and without offence in the day of Christ. We thank God that He has saved us from the defiant mood which says "I will not"; but we shall thank Him more if He will save us altogether from the worse sin of those who say "I will" and do not.

THE WICKED HUSBANDMEN

BY THE VERY REV. PRINCIPAL ALEXANDER
STEWART, D.D.

THE WICKED HUSBANDMEN

“Hear another parable : There was a certain householder, which planted a vineyard, and hedged it round about, and digged a wine-press in it, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen, and went into a far country,” &c.—MATTHEW xxi. 33-41.

MANY of the parables of Jesus have a meaning and a charm altogether apart from their capacity of being interpreted in a spiritual sense. They are pictures of life—beautiful stories, if we will—into which the higher meaning must be read. Such are the Sower, the Prodigal, the Samaritan—each of them charming us by its freshness and naturalness, and impressing upon us some important truth by way of moral, in addition to the spiritual truth, the Divine revelation, of which it is the vehicle. In the case of other parables, again, the outward form is of comparatively small account. The incidents and features of the narrative are chosen, not as a usual and natural picture of life, but primarily with a view to the deeper meaning intended to be conveyed. On this deeper meaning the attention is from the first concentrated ; the story forms but a transparent veil through which it shines ; and for the sake of

it a certain risk is run even of confusion and improbability. It need scarcely be said that in such a case there is evidently present some strong emotion on the part of the speaker—emotion which all but drives him to dispense entirely with figurative speech, and to burst into direct expression of his feeling, whether it be of indignation, scorn, or any other intense impassioned movement of the soul. The purpose of parabolic speech, however, is still preserved—the purpose, namely, of enlisting on the right side whatever natural sense of justice might be lingering in the breast of the hearer—as when King David pronounced a judgment after hearing Nathan's parable of the Ewe Lamb, which indignation and self-deceit would probably have prevented him from entertaining for a moment, had the charge from the first been laid directly against himself.

The parable which forms our text belongs to the latter class. We have only to compare it mentally with that of the Prodigal Son or the good Samaritan to feel the force of the distinction just drawn. We may perhaps consider that a modern commentator on the Parables¹ goes too far when he says that here the narrative passes altogether beyond the bounds of probability. "Who ever heard," he asks, "of husbandmen, even in the worst-governed countries, behaving as these vine-dressers?"² It is unfortunately not only in

¹ A. B. Bruce, *The Parabolic Teaching of Christ*. ² P. 448.

the East, and not only eighteen centuries ago, that payment of rent has been refused, and violence has been threatened or offered to those who demanded it. But we may all agree with the expositor to whom I have referred when, after questioning whether, in the circumstances in which Jesus was now placed, it was worth while to throw His utterances into the form of parable—whether, “when it comes to speaking so plainly as is done here, it were not better to speak more plainly still, and to describe in undisguised, unfigurative terms the repulsive facts of the past, and the not less repulsive events about to happen”—he suggests as the true explanation “that in this instance Jesus did not so much invent a new parable as use an old one whose words were familiar to Jewish ears, and its meaning generally understood—that, namely, contained in Isaiah’s song of the vineyard.”¹ No one can fail to see the connection and resemblance between these two remarkable passages of Scripture. There are, indeed, differences apparent, not only in their form but in their immediate purpose, but it is the same great principle which underlies them both. Moreover, similar language is employed by Jeremiah in more than one place, so that we can readily understand how intelligible it would all be to the hearers of Christ. Everyone would know “what the vineyard, with its hedge, wine-press, and tower signified, and who

¹ Bruce, p. 449.

the vine-dressers were, and who the servants sent for the fruits." "These phrases belonged to the established religious dialect of Israel as much as the words 'pastor,' 'flock,' 'Sion,' and so on, do to ours, so that they are used by us all almost without consciousness that we are speaking in figures." Thrust it from them, therefore, as they might, whether they assumed indifference, or were so blinded and deadened by their selfishness and malice that they only slowly realised that His words were directed against them, the chief priests and Pharisees, as well as the people who surrounded Jesus, could not but at length perceive His meaning and experience the scorching blast of His indignant reproof. The conflict between them was reaching its crisis ; the time for entreaty was all but past ; it only remained sternly to warn those who were preparing the cross for the greatest of all the messengers of God of the doom which they were bringing upon themselves.

This is one of the few parables which are narrated by each of the first three Evangelists. St. Mark and St. Luke, however, though differing in slight details, add nothing of importance to the account of St. Matthew. The chief priests and elders of the people had come to Jesus as He was teaching, and asked, "By what authority doest Thou these things ? and who gave Thee this authority ?" (ver. 23). They thus took up a position as if they were not only the representatives, but the guardians of

the people ; as if it was their duty to prevent the people from being misled and imposed upon. Jesus immediately proceeds to show what sort of guardians and guides these were. He convicts them of want of courage. They *dare* not answer His question about the baptism of John, whether it was from heaven or of men. He charges them in the brief parable of the Two Sons with insincerity and hypocrisy, with professing a loyalty with their lips which their deeds were far from bearing out. And then turning not only to them, but to the whole body of the people by whom He had been surrounded when they came to Him, He exposes the character and attitude of the nation generally, and especially of its rulers and representatives, with "a sacred passion of prophetic indignation," in words that must have seared like flame.

Let us note in the parable before us the picture it presents, first, of the Divine goodness and forbearance ; secondly, of human presumption and rebellion ; and lastly, of the inevitable doom. And let us consider these points both as affecting the Jews of Christ's day and as conveying a lesson for ourselves.

I.

First, then, we have depicted the Divine goodness and forbearance.

"There was a certain householder, which planted a vineyard, and hedged it round about, and digged

a wine-press in it, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen, and went into a far country." So characteristic is the description that an Eastern traveller has remarked that "the first parable that rises before the mind of the traveller as he enters Judæa from the desert is that of the Vineyard. . . . Enclosures of loose stone . . . everywhere catch the eye on the bare slopes of Hebron, of Bethlehem, and of Olivet; and at the corner of each rises its square grey tower . . . whilst, more rarely, the rocky surface of the ground is hewn into the level floor for the pressing of the grapes, and the cavity to receive the juice as it streams from the feet of the wine-pressers." ¹ Our Lord here employs language almost identical with that of the prophet—² "My well-beloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill, and he fenced it, and gathered out the stones thereof, and planted it with the choicest vines, and built a tower in the midst of it, and also made a wine-press therein." Must we not understand as also implied in our Lord's words the impassioned appeal of the prophet—"What could have been done more to my vineyard that I have not done in it?" The vineyard was planted, furnished with a hedge for protection against wild beasts, and with a tower to serve as a look-out against robbers, and perhaps also for the vine-dressers to live in. Everything which care and thoughtfulness could provide

¹ Stanley, *Sinai and Palestine*, pp. 420-21.

² Isaiah v.

was there. The forms which the respective complaints of the prophet and of the Saviour take no doubt differ somewhat, but they substantially correspond. *There* it is, "Wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes?" *Here* the personal element is introduced and emphasised; nothing is said of the productiveness of the vineyard, but the whole difficulty is laid at the door of the husbandmen who withheld from the rightful owner whatever fruits there were. The result, it is evident, was the same. He who had lavished care and thought, labour and expense, upon the vineyard was deprived of that return which he had a right to expect. Let us admit that in the sphere of everyday life this result was in both cases, if *possible*, at any rate *exceptional*. It would be seldom, indeed, that, after due skill had been exercised, and every precaution taken, the wild grapes should still appear instead of the cultivated fruit. Nature does not thus betray the trust reposed in her. More frequently, but still comparatively seldom, it might happen that those in charge of a vineyard denied the owner, and refused to carry out the contract, whatever its nature, into which they had entered with him. Self-interest does not often lead men to act thus. But in the higher sphere that which would be impossible or unlikely in the lower too often becomes the rule. There we come in contact with the mystery of the *human will*, round which all possible barriers may be erected, to which

all possible inducements may be offered, and which may yet break through the one and despise the other, doing the very opposite of that which ought to be done, which it was designed to do, and which it was its true interest to have done. The field may respond to the culture of the husbandman, the servant may remain faithful to his master's interests, and may recognise that in so doing he is doing the best for himself, "but Israel doth not know, My people doth not consider." "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth : for the Lord hath spoken, I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against Me."

Yet when we pass in review what God had done for Israel, can we say that either by the prophet or the Saviour the picture is in the least overdrawn ? Without dwelling upon details, was not Israel among the nations like a vineyard chosen and cherished ? Had not God's "ways been made known unto Moses, His acts unto the children of Israel" ? The law was theirs to teach them righteousness, the sacrifices to bring them to a sense of sin, the prophets to warn them, the psalmists to comfort and encourage them, all the institutions and the whole history of their nation to train them to receive and rejoice in the kingdom of God. Whatever outward influences could be brought to bear upon the human will so as to *incline* without *compelling* it in the way of goodness and truth were constantly and faithfully employed. Israel at least

could not say that if she failed it was from the want of privileges. God's goodness to her at the first, when He called her as a nation from the land of Egypt, and His forbearance with her throughout the whole history of her apostasies and idolatries, were beyond dispute. What more could have been done for the vineyard? Israel remained without excuse.

And as for us, brethren, are the same goodness and long-suffering not clearly marked in our experience also? Have the privileges of Christian parentage, Christian education, and the influences of society and of the Church not been as a hedge defending us from many foes? In the nature and extent of our spiritual knowledge we go far beyond the people of the ancient covenant, for we are permitted to contemplate a salvation, not foreshadowed only but perfected, to read the true meaning of the life and death of Christ. And if we scrutinise our individual lives, must we not bear testimony how God has been merciful and patient with us, not visiting sin at once with judgment, but granting opportunity for repentance? Has He not cause to say of us also, "I looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes?"

II.

Note, then, what indeed is the prominent feature of the parable—the presumption and rebellion of man.

“When the time of the fruit drew near,” the householder did what was only reasonable and right—“he sent his servants to the husbandmen, that they might receive the fruits of it. And the husbandmen took his servants, and beat one, and killed another, and stoned another.” Since the fruit did not become ripe all at one time, it is probably meant that a series of servants was despatched, and as these became more earnest and insistent in their demands, the husbandmen proceeded to greater lengths. “One is flayed by stripes, another is slain by the sword, a third is put to death by stoning,” and these are selected as examples of the fate of all. It has been suggested that when it is said “he sent other servants more than the first” the true meaning is “*greater*, of higher rank than the first.”¹ In any case, it is obvious that there is a gradual preparation for, a working up towards, the last final effort, when “he sent his son, saying, They will reverence my son. But when the husbandmen saw the son, they said among themselves, This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance. And they caught him,

¹ Goebel, *The Parables of Jesus* (Eng. tr.), p. 344.

and cast him out of the vineyard, and slew him." Such is the image set before us of the obduracy, the blind infatuation, which characterises human guilt. Ordinary calculations cease to apply to it. The motives which seem most rational, which are recognised as of force in every-day life, fail of their effect. There is neither truth, nor mercy, nor reverence, left. All loyalty is thrust out from hearts which can repay the trust of a father sending his "own son, his well-beloved," as St. Mark expresses it, with conspiracy and violence. There was not only no loyalty, there was even a great imprudence; for they presumed upon the forbearance that had been shown them; they thought that because they still escaped punishment the owner could not or would not strike; and so they foolishly measured their strength with his.

Had it not been so in the history of Israel? Had not disrespect for authority, whenever authority ran counter to inclination, been a characteristic of Israel's leaders and representative men all through? Had not the law ever been regarded as a burden, the sinful and idolatrous life of the surrounding nations as an attraction, the worship of God as a weariness, the practice of virtue and the pursuit of holiness as alike painful and hopeless? What had been the fate of the prophets who had appeared from time to time? Is it a wonder that Jesus here, and Stephen after Him in a passage which reads like a commentary upon this parable, pointed out

that this seemed to be the habitual attitude of the people, from which it behoved those whom they addressed to prove if they could that they must be reckoned as exceptions? Could we have a more distinct acceptance of the Cross as the end of His mission than we have from the lips of Jesus here?

In like manner, let us remember the fearful responsibility that rests upon ourselves for the acceptance or rejection of the means of grace. Do we not constantly witness the amazing power of the human soul to encase itself in evil; to go on with blind recklessness, to neglect opportunities of good and follow evil as though it were the way to bliss, to resist the strongest motives, the most powerful appeals? Christ died; but men are indifferent to the tragic import of His sacrifice; they are scornful of the claim which His self-denying love makes upon them. With mind and heart fixed on some fancied good, they pursue their way, heedless of the wrong-doing to which, as they follow it, they are tempted and driven, heedless of the irretrievable ruin in which it will infallibly end.

III.

For what is the doom to which such rebellion is exposed, and which, unrepented, it incurs?

The question, according to St. Matthew, was put to those surrounding Jesus, and they, either not yet

perceiving that they were condemned by their own words, or wishing to assume an unconcern they did not feel, answered, "He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons." "Miserably destroy!" Nearly forty years later there was a miserable destruction, when Jerusalem was besieged and taken by the Roman armies under Titus, and her children slain and carried away captive, and the Gospel which the Jews refused was offered to the Gentiles.

In the destruction of Jerusalem we see exemplified the eternal principle that the nation or people that will not serve God shall perish, not by arbitrary decree, but by the necessity of things. That which is cut off from the fountain of life must die. The branch that abides not in the vine withers. Brethren, do we acknowledge the justice of God's claim to our love and service? Are we not His by creation, and by the right of providential care? Has He not the right to demand of us the fruit of faith and good living? Has He not borne with our waywardness, and given us opportunities of repentance and renewal? Then let us beware lest the voice which now bids us repent come to pronounce against us the doom of the finally impenitent. Our hope is in His mercy, for He who gave for us His own, His well-beloved, Son, will He not with Him also freely give us all things?

THE WEDDING-FEAST AND THE
WEDDING-GARMENT

BY REV. ALBERT GOODRICH, D.D.

THE WEDDING-FEAST AND THE WEDDING-GARMENT

“ The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son, and sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding : and they would not come.”—MATTHEW xxii. 1-14.

THE parable of the Great Supper has already set forth the kingdom as a feast and the freedom and urgency of the invitation to partake of it. The distinctive particular of this parable is the wedding-garment, though it has been called an appendix to the parable.

I.

What is the wedding-garment ?

The man without the wedding-garment was not of those leading Jews who had notions of the kingdom of God, expectations as to what it should be, and then, finding it to be quite other, were angry and opposed it, even killing its messengers. He was not angry at the invitation. Neither was the man without the wedding-garment one of the worldly, even sordid,

company, absorbed in their farm or merchandise, without a thought above business and money. He therefore did not, as they, make light of the invitation. On the contrary, he was somewhat intellectual, he had some interest in truth, he had caught glimpses of ideals, of feasts for the higher nature. He gave accordingly a ready ear to the invitation ; he would at least go and see what it all was. But though he had interest enough to accept the invitation, he was quite disqualified to partake of and to sit through the feast.

What, then, is the one thing that qualifies to partake of and to enjoy the feast ? To begin with, there must be appetite. A person with no appetite, sickly, weakly, is out of place at a feast. And next, he needs a spirit of sympathy with the general object of the feast. The feast of the kingdom of God consists in truth, forgiveness, righteousness, knowledge of and communion with God. The qualification for such viands is plainly desire and relish for spiritual truth, such hunger for God and good as makes the partaking of them joy. So far, then, the wedding-garment, the fitness for the feast, is not simply an intellectual interest in truth, not simply a feeling of curiosity as to divine things, not simply lack of hostility to God and good, but a positive appetite for and relish of spiritual things, such as constrains the soul to fall to with a festal delight and eat and drink, appropriate, the revelation of God and the redemption of Christ. (The

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spirit of reverence and penitence, the spirit which feels its lack and has faith to accept, the spirit of loyalty and love to the King and King's Son—that is the wedding-garment. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.”

“Personal holiness, a manifestly righteous character,” say some, is meant by this wedding-garment. But they who accepted the invitation, among whom was this man, came from the highways and cross-ways of the world; they were the Gentiles. They were not manifestly righteous characters. Moreover, you notice the fellow-guests of this man without the wedding-garment did not, it would seem, notice his lack; only the King when he came in noticed it. The lowly hungering spirit for truth and grace, the inward longing for forgiveness and righteousness, is not very visible to others. One sitting here may be clothed with it, the one next may quite lack it; yet to our eyes no difference is visible. But the King in a moment notices the difference—wider to him than night and day. Had the garment been outward joyous righteousness, all would have seen it; but before the feast actually began the lack of appetite was not visible. The wedding-garment, then, is the sense of lack, of emptiness, of unworthiness; the feeling of hunger; the spirit of penitence and reverence, faith. “A broken and contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise.”

II.

We will now inquire, Who are likely to lack this wedding-garment?

The pagans or Gentiles to whom the apostles first preached the kingdom, and to whom this part of the parable is specially applicable, were those most likely to attend the feast without the wedding-garment. The Gentile world of the apostles' day on the whole did not make light of Christianity. It was a new thing to them, which they rather liked to hear about. They had for long been discussing the problems to which it gave an answer, and they were quite willing to discuss that answer. Moreover, they were heart-sick of the religion in which they had been educated ; its hollowness and superstition had become quite clear to them. At the first, therefore, they did not hate and kill the messengers of the kingdom of God. They had not the spiritual pride of the leaders of the Jews. The Gentile did not, as the Jew, think that he deserved or merited the kingdom, that of right the kingdom belonged to him. He did not, therefore, like the Jew, regard the invitation, treating him as undeserving yet graciously invited, as an offence. On the contrary, the Gentile or pagan, though not without pride of his own kind, accepted the invitation. Yet he was not lowly ; for he could not see that

there was any real need of his being poor in spirit. True, he was not very worthy, but he was not particularly unworthy. He could go to the feast as he was; he did not need any spirit of penitence and reverence; he was well enough as he was. He was interested; he was open to discuss matters; he would see what it was like. He accepted the invitation. What more was wanted? And so, lacking in modesty, penitence, he pushed himself right into the company of Christians, attended their worship and partook of their sacraments, and gave a general consent to their positions. He went in, not having the wedding-garment, the spirit of penitence and reverence, of lowliness and faith, which to the King's eye is the festal robe, that alone which gives relish for and joy in the feast.

Are there not such in the Churches to-day? They do not make light of Christianity, they do not oppose it, they have no malignant feeling towards its messengers. In a degree, they accept its invitation, they attend its services, are interested, have some curiosity as to Christian doctrine, will even take some part in Christian work. They are among the guests of the Christian feast. Most people—many real Christians—see no lack in them; no remark is made upon them; they are treated as approved guests—until the King comes in. Yes, brethren, we may be here, members of Christ's Church, partakers of the Lord's Supper, and yet before the King be without the wedding-garment.

The question for us is : Have I spiritual appetite ? relish for and joy in spiritual things ? Have I, apart from Christ's salvation, a sense of want, of lack, a feeling of utter emptiness, of complete unworthiness ? Do I hunger for God, for His forgiveness, and His communion ? Do I, with the eagerness of a healthy appetite, take, eat and drink Jesus Christ as the bread of my life and the wine of my spirit ?

III.

These are not idle questions, for note now the seriousness of the lack of the wedding-garment.

And when the King came in. There are times in this life when the King comes in—times when the soul has a clear vision of the greatness and authority of God, of the truth and the light, when the sense of God's royal love and grace overwhelms the soul with the feeling of its own unworthiness. And there is that final time in the world to come.

"Friend," says the King, "how camest thou in hither not having a wedding-garment ?" The demand that in receiving God's salvation we should have the lowly, penitent spirit is not arbitrary or burdensome. We are naturally destitute of righteousness, we have lack indeed ; in our hearts there are pride, vanity, wrath, ungodliness : we ought,

therefore, to be lowly and to desire truth and right. It is no hardship to require of a very poor man that he should not esteem himself to be rich. "Friend, how camest thou in hither at this feast with no appetite for it? at this wedding festival with no regard for the bridegroom? What has been your motive in coming? If you did not want it, if you did not care for the King and the King's Son, why are you here?"

If this wedding-garment were personal holiness, we might plead that really we are spiritually so poor that we could not get together the money, the spiritual energy, to attain the holiness; or if the wedding-garment were certain reasoned beliefs in certain religious propositions, we might say we have not time and ability to master and weigh all the evidence for and against the propositions. But since the wedding-garment is nothing more than the sense of our spiritual poverty and weakness when we are really poor and weak, nothing more than the consciousness of the fact that we are destitute of righteousness which we ought to have, what excuse have we for not having the wedding-garment? The demand that we should have it is reasonable and merciful. The poorest can have it. Indeed, the poorer the soul the more accessible to it is this wedding-garment—the being poor in spirit. Well, then, may the King, in a tone of surprise, say, "Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding-garment?—the garment so

fitting to you and to me, the garment so close to your hand, the garment so simple and free. Have you come, since you have come without the spiritual appetite, to look on and to criticise me, your King, and my guests? Have you, my poor unworthy subject, come as a patron of me and of my marriage-feast?"

"And he was speechless." There began to rise before him the huge pride, the monstrous audacity, of his conduct. In the presence of his King, at the sound of His voice, his assumptions, his dreams that he had need of nothing, melted clear away. He had not a word to say. He was overwhelmed in amazement and shame. He was speechless. Poor man! Oh! brethren, we may to-day have much to say why we are not reverent and penitent, why we are not loyal and dutiful towards the King—God and good. Or we may be so unconscious that we lack anything that we assume serenely all is well, though we have not the wedding-garment. But when the King comes in, when the glory of His presence fills our soul, and we are conscious His eye is upon us, and we hear His voice, so authoritative, "How camest thou in hither not having a wedding-garment?" the excuses we now glibly utter, the assumptions which now so completely possess us, will utterly fall away from us; we shall in amazement see their worthlessness and our folly: we shall be speechless.

And the King said, "Bind him hand and foot,

and cast him out into outer darkness ; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." He was not beaten ; he was not tortured ; he was simply cast out into the outer darkness. He lost the feast and the King. To suffer loss, the loss of truth and goodness, of God and man—that is the punishment. To see how much you have lost, what you might have been if you had only been not self-willed, not proud-hearted ; to see that the great prize once so near your grasp has passed for ever from you ; the door to unutterable riches and joys once wide open to you now for ever closed against you—that is the horrible sentence, the awful retribution.

"For of all sad words of tongue or pen
The saddest are these, it might have been."

It is this sense of utter loss, through our own infatuated pride and folly, that binds us hand and foot, manacles our mind with impotent wrath, and fetters our spirit with lasting despair, and casts out from the presence of the King, from forgiving grace, moral inspiration, spiritual energy, into the outer darkness, the darkness outside the light and joy of the banqueting-hall with its music and dancing, its gracious King and happy company, outside of truth known, character attained, society enjoyed, the vision of God and the bliss of perfected life. Oh ! the loneliness, the coldness, the darkness, the despair of that ! There is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Deliver us, O Lord, therefrom.

THE TEN VIRGINS

BY THE VERY REV. PRINCIPAL ALEXANDER
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THE TEN VIRGINS

"Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom," &c.—MATTHEW XXV. 1-13.

It is night in an Eastern city; the narrow streets are deserted; sunk in slumber are the inhabitants of the houses, the dark outlines of which can be traced against the sky. From one solitary dwelling only beams a light, faint and flickering. In the chamber whence it emanates a strange group of human beings is gathered together. The apartment is adorned with all the circumstance of Oriental luxury. Upon low divans and sumptuous cushions, carelessly but picturesquely dispersed upon the floor and against the walls, repose a number of female figures, attired, not for sleep, but for the stirring scenes of the feast and the dance. The sleep that blesses in the intervals of intense excitement, when the wearied body undergoes a reaction, and the thought of excitement to come is not sufficient to sustain the exhausted energies—in those moments when, all that could be done having been done, there is nothing left but to wait—has overtaken

them. There, as they sat in sprightly conversation, the merry voices hushed and the ringing laugh ended, while the flickering lamp by the side of each casts its dancing light across dark tresses, rich garments and closed eyelids, they slumber and sleep.

Deep silence reigns within and without. The solitary tread of some late wanderer or the bark of the dogs which infest the streets of an Oriental town alone disturb the universal quiet. One hour, and yet another, passes by ; midnight is at hand. And now in the distance is heard the faint sound of music, mingled with shouts of joy, and the deep murmur of an approaching multitude. They come nearer, the sounds become more distinguishable, and not to be mistaken. A long line of light is traced through the winding thoroughfares, the glare of torches is cast upon the fantastic buildings. And now the wild cry is raised : "Behold, the bridegroom cometh ; go ye out to meet him." Within that dwelling all is at once hurry and confusion. Busy feet are rushing to and fro, the work of preparation is completed, answering shouts of jubilation are raised. The chamber where all was recently so still is now a scene of life and bustle. The virgin companions of the bride rouse themselves from slumber, trim their lamps, and, taking their oil-vessels with them, go out into the night to meet the bridegroom. Small pause is made as they join themselves to the procession. The joyful train

sweeps onward. Arrived at the bridegroom's dwelling, they find all open for their reception; they pass in, and the doors are shut. Useless is it then for any dilatory guest to knock at those gates. A strong guard is placed over them, who will not allow any interruption of the festivities. When the friends are so numerous and the occasion so important, it is justly considered that any one by being unready proves himself unworthy of the privileges to which he had been summoned.

Such is the scene to which our Lord alludes in the parable before us—a scene very familiar to those, to whom it was originally addressed. Few among them could have failed to have been present at just such a ceremony. And indeed, with that tenacity of custom and observance characteristic of the East, scenes precisely similar in all important particulars are still to be observed and have been described by travellers of the present day. With what force and vividness must this illustration, drawn from their own domestic life and surrounded with the most endearing associations, have fallen upon the ears of our Lord's disciples. Nor has the interest of it declined with years. Among the similitudes by which Jesus illustrated the different phases of the "kingdom of heaven"—that kingdom whose subjects are the spirits of men, whose laws are summed up in love, which He came to establish upon earth—few are so replete with solemn warning, tenderly and delicately administered, few have been

the subjects of more careful study and more loving contemplation than the parable of the Ten Virgins.

The central thought of the parable is the *fact* that the call of duty comes to some prepared and to others unprepared for its discharge ; and the consequent *warning* that mere unreadiness will render all other qualifications of no avail and of no value, excluding both from the possibility of performing what is required and from participation in the reward which attends on that performance alone. The duty of all the virgins alike was to accompany the bride and bridegroom to their abode. The wisdom of the wise virgins consisted in their perfect preparedness to do so, the foolishness of the foolish in their unreadiness and want of care. And in order to place in a more striking light the great danger of that sin of presumption and improvidence against which the whole parable is designed as a warning, all other imaginable causes of the final catastrophe are put aside. Only in one point did the wise and foolish virgins differ, yet upon that one point turned their widely different destiny. A hundred strong links may be in the chain, but a single weak one renders the whole useless. Unreadiness, neglect, carelessness, trusting that something will happen opportunely, or that some contingency which we fear will never come to pass, instead of being prepared, as far as lies in our power, for every event—such is the sin of which we are here taught to beware. Such is the error, the

evil consequences of which are as surely inevitable as it is true that lost opportunities can never be recalled.

No doubt in this parable—indeed in all the parables of this chapter—Jesus was primarily referring to the experience through which His disciples and the Church would be called upon to pass—the former when He was taken away from them, the latter when He came again to judge the world in the glory of His Father and of all the holy angels. When He came again would He find faith on the earth? Would there be the earnest expectation, the looking for the revealing of the power of God? Or would it be as in the days of the Noah, when all went on with most mundane regularity, the mirth and the festival, the marrying and giving in marriage, with no higher outlook, with no thought of the impending doom, until the day when Noah entered into the ark and the period of grace was over? “Watch,” is the Saviour’s admonition—“Watch, therefore; for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh.”

I propose, however, to consider the parable, of which these words form the fitting and impressive conclusion, in a much more general way. I take it as a type or symbol of those calls of duty, of those opportunities of good, which we from time to time receive, which we may use or neglect, and which according to our use and neglect of them will be for our happiness or our shame.

Christ comes to us with every call of duty, His voice summonses us to work and to endure for Him. If we are ready, we are able to answer the call and to accompany the bridegroom to the marriage; if we are unprepared, He passes on, and the door is for ever shut. It is of no use then to plead our worthiness in other respects, our willingness to perform this duty also, if only we had the present ability; it is unavailing to point to the preparations we have already made, or to ask for time to perfect them. That constitution of things under which we live is ruled by the inexorable law that reward only attaches to duty done, and that we can only make sure of performing duty by being at all times thoroughly prepared for its discharge.

For observe, these virgins were all *alike qualified* for the task which lay before them. When the foolish virgins came to the door seeking admission the plea was never once advanced that they were in any way unfitted for their office. It was their folly, and that alone, which had excluded them. So there is no man, however naturally depraved, however weighed down with a load of guilt, who is thereby unfitted to become an object of God's redeeming mercy in Christ. The chief of sinners may be transformed into an angel of light, and he whose hand had wrought only works of darkness may be made willing and strong to do the will of his Father who is in heaven.

Again, these virgins were all *alike chosen*; they

were the chosen friends of the bride and bridegroom, selected to bear a special and important part in the nuptial ceremonies. They had no excuse to offer for the non-fulfilment of any duty ; they could not evade it on the plea that it was not incumbent upon them. They had an individual responsibility with respect to it ; they had been summoned individually and specially to perform it. Not only so, but they had accepted the office entrusted to them voluntarily ; it was no compulsory service. "They went forth to meet the bridegroom." We are never unbidden guests in God's presence, we are never unenlisted soldiers in God's army ; if we are there at all we have come at God's invitation and of our own free will. No duty, therefore, which can present itself is not incumbent upon us ; our commission is a general one to do whatever we can for Him. And still less can that special duty to which we have been called, which we have voluntarily undertaken, be excusably laid aside. As it was the virgins' obvious and natural duty to accompany the bridegroom, so is it ours carefully to do that for which we are peculiarly fitted, to which we feel we have been peculiarly summoned.

Further, these virgins were up to a certain point all alike *prepared* to meet the bridegroom ; all were furnished with brightly-burning lamps. They fully comprehended what that duty was which would be required of them ; they went forth from their homes with the deliberate purpose of discharging it, and

according to their views of its magnitude were not unprovided with the means of doing so—"They took their lamps" with them. Had the bridegroom come when they expected him, they would all alike have entered in to the marriage. A possible cause of the final exclusion of some is here again laid out of account. They had not committed the gross carelessness of bringing no light whatever with them. They had not even provided themselves insufficiently apart from the consideration of delay. In every point they seemed fully prepared for the efficient performance of everything that was likely to be required of them. So may a Christian man be now fully equal to his duty. His soul cleansed from sin by the purifying blood of Christ, many evil tendencies overcome by the work of the sanctifying Spirit, he may be fully conscious of being called by the Divine voice and upheld by the Divine strength; he may hunger and thirst after some deed to be done for God, some suffering to be undergone for His sake; he may be preserving his body in purity, and his soul in uprightness; he may be a vessel full of grace, a lamp very brightly burning. Oh, that he might be brought face to face with his task! Oh, that the steps of the bridegroom would hasten, while the firm-set lips betoken resolution and the heart beats with a generous warmth! Oh, that this high hope would never fail and this enthusiasm grow cool no more!

But at this point a distinction between the virgins

emerges. We learn from a Jewish author that ten lamps or torches was the usual number in a marriage procession, and the selection of ten as the whole number of the virgins is probably thus accounted for ; but of these in this instance five, we are told, "were wise, and five were foolish. They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them ; but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps." Some have supposed that by lamps torches are meant or wicks fastened on staves and supplied with oil from the accompanying vessel. This would support the view that the foolish virgins were wholly without faith, that their lamps were never lit, had never really burned. But apart from the consideration that this would alter the whole lesson of the parable, which turns on the distinction not between faith and no faith, but between an enduring and an unenduring faith, that the lamps here mentioned were proper lamps, and that the oil was kept in a separate vessel for future replenishment, not for immediate consumption, is evident from the seventh and eighth verses. There we are told, not that the virgins *lighted* their lamps, but that they *trimmed* them, and the foolish virgins complain, not that the lamps could not be lighted, but that they were going out. The lamps had thus been burning all the time the virgins were slumbering, and therefore must have had a store of oil in themselves apart from the oil-vessels which accompanied them.

All alike, then, had filled their lamps with oil,

but the wise virgins had filled the oil-vessels too. They made provision against delay. Had, then, the thought of delay not occurred to the foolish virgins ? It must have done so, but they had evidently not realised it as they ought. Yet the bridegroom came by midnight, and in the East it is not uncommon for him to be detained beyond that time. Had these virgins not been deficient in interest and zeal, they would not have run the risk of exclusion from the festivities for want of a sufficient store of oil, which might have been so easily procured. They were careless—they probably never thought of ascertaining whether they were adequately provided ; or they were presumptuous—they thought that, if required, some one would perhaps be superabundantly supplied ; or they were idle—they did not want the trouble of going to those that sold the oil, but chose rather to run the risk of the bridegroom coming upon them unprepared. But whichever of these was the actual cause of the omission, each and all would have been impossible to a more burning zeal, to a more ardent enthusiasm. Had their love to the bride been more intense, had their interest in the proceedings been more real, had their sense of duty been more commanding, they would have anxiously contemplated every possibility and provided against every contingency, as the warrior going into the battle examined every link and every buckle of his armour. As it was, they were ready for present duty, but had not contemplated delay. So

there are those who are ready to obey all ordinary requirements, and make all ordinary sacrifices for God and Christ, who in the day of special duty and special trial are found wholly unprepared. They are of those ignoble souls who, if only they are saved, are willing that it should be as "by fire." To live as little out of the world and as little opposed to the world's customs and prescriptions as a Christian can well do, is the life they select for themselves. To have the faintly beating pulse and the nerveless frame of one just recovering from a death-like torpor is their idea of *life*. Ah, what mean these cold, corpse-like figures with their flickering lamps in the marriage procession? This is the season of high-hearted youth, of warm hearts and jubilant faces, of loud voices and untiring limbs, of lamps flaring out upon the darkness. Will the bridegroom accept that frigid greeting instead of the warm, enthusiastic reception which befits the occasion? Oh, ye who think so to serve God, ye deceive your own souls! The call of duty will oftentimes come to you when you are unequal to it. Great things as well as small are to be done in the world. Never imagine to yourselves limits to the duties for which alone you have to be prepared. Be ready for the greatest, and you will not be wanting for the less; but if you think only of the least, the greater will overwhelm you in ruin. That which was fatal to the foolish virgins was the delay of the bridegroom. You may have been ready for a duty once,

yet have allowed your watchfulness to slacken. Learn to imitate the wise virgins, and, prepared for every contingency, possess your soul in patience. Let not your sword get rusted from inaction, let not your vigilance be lulled into security, let not the oil dwindle; be ready at all times for all things. "This is the point of the parable," says Calvin, "that it is not enough to have been once girt up and prepared for duty, unless we endure even unto the end."

Observe, it was not from want of time that no oil was provided—for the bridegroom tarried; nor was it from excess of occupation—for while he tarried they all slumbered and slept. Even then, at the last hour, that which was requisite might have been procured; and better then than later—when the bridegroom was already approaching, and when, as they actually found themselves compelled to go and buy, they consequently lost the opportunity of participating in the marriage festivities.

"They slumbered and slept." God does not summon us to useless tasks. There was no need that they should watch; all that was required of them was to be ready. The wise virgins slept the sleep of innocence and virtue. They had done all they could; their duty was patiently to wait, yea, to sleep, that they might not be wearied and sleep-oppressed when called to more active exertion. The foolish slept the sleep of ignorance and carelessness. Who could now distinguish between them? None; until the awaking revealed what they were.

“At midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him.” The time for action had at length arrived; the pealing summons fell upon waiting ears. “Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out,” or, as in the Revised Version, “our lamps are going out.” There is here no want of inclination or of willingness; they arise with full purpose of obeying the call; they set about the final preparations necessary, apparently unconscious of the true state of matters, or at least not fully realising it. Now, when they come to trim their lamps the foolish virgins perceive for the first time the error they have made, but the remedy is apparently easy. Indolence and selfishness not infrequently go together. Those who will not think or act for themselves are not unwilling to take advantage of the greater foresight and energy of others. There is as little apprehension as remorse in the calmness of the solicitation, “Give us of your oil; for our lamps are going out.” But the importance of the occasion demands a supply which can only be met by individual prudence. At such a time there is nothing over. With all their wisdom the wise virgins were able to bring no more than sufficed for their own requirements. There is no unkindness or want of generosity in their reply. “Not so; lest there be not enough for us and you”; still less is there mockery in their advice,

“but go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves.” The imprudent must bear the consequences of their imprudence ; neglect and sloth are not so easily remedied as they suppose. A present effort, an endeavour hastily to accomplish what should have been long ago and leisurely cared for, is the only alternative. When an extraordinary duty comes to a man who has only prepared himself for ordinary duties, it may not find him unwilling to attempt it. But he soon discovers his want of strength; he has allowed his opportunities of spiritual sustenance to pass away unimproved. The human assistance, which he at first invokes, is powerless to help him. Each man has his own burden to carry, his own contest to wage. Each man’s strength, even at the best, is barely sufficient for that which devolves upon him. Besides, responsibility is individual; it cannot be shifted from one to another. Are *you* ready for the calls to be made upon *you* ? is the question addressed to each. If, through neglect and sloth, you be not ready, the opportunity for discharging that duty may pass never to return.

But when human aid is unavailing, may not Divine aid still be sought ? It may. Instead of sinking under despair, or sinfully acquiescing in the passing away of the opportunity, go to them that sell, and buy ; in other words, seek, in the appointed means of grace, the aids of God’s Holy Spirit, the supply of the strength which you need. It may be that the call of duty will not have ceased to sound before

you are able to answer to it. Too frequently, however, is the fate of these careless ones that of the foolish virgins. "While they went to buy the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut. Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us. But he answered and said, Verily, I say unto you, I know you not." To obtain the requisite grace may require time, and meanwhile the occasion passes by. The virgins went and bought, they came back supplied; there was nothing then to prevent them from fulfilling their office, save that the opportunity had passed. We are not told that they could not buy, that the shops were shut, but simply that it was too late for that time. They never wanted *will*, now they have *strength* also, but they cannot recall lost opportunities. Not even the marvellous power of prayer can bring back the chance of discharging duty neglected.

In vain they cry at the door, "Lord, Lord, open to us." With the duty there has also passed away from them position and privilege. The bridegroom knows only as the attendants of the bride those who met him on his way, and conveyed him to his abode. No others have any claim upon him. They only are the true wedding guests who are ready to go in. Absence from whatever cause involves a forfeiture of all rights. They only who have discharged the duty can participate in the

reward. It is nothing to have the name or the outward appearance of a Christian, it is by action alone that sincerity is attested and approved.

We have thus considered the parable in its more general bearing and in its reference to the thought which underlies it, and we have endeavoured to show how every circumstance enforces the warning which it is designed to urge upon men. But there is a special application in the light of which it is, as I have already mentioned, more frequently regarded. It is a solemn thought that there will be a final coming of the Bridegroom when those who lack oil shall go in vain to them that sell. The time for buying will be for ever gone. There is a call continually sounding in our ears, with which it is our wisdom to comply. It is the call to participation in the mind and life of Christ, in His life of Sonship toward the Father, and of brotherhood toward men. It is the call to accept the salvation which He offers, which He purchased by His precious blood. *Now* may this offer be accepted, *now* may the living waters be partaken of without money and without price, *now* has eternal life its abode among men. But He who now comes in mercy will hereafter come in judgment, and they who have pierced Him upon the earth shall look upon Him with despairing eyes. Woe unto those, whose darkened lamps shall then betray them, who come seeking entrance at the shut door, and meet the inexorable reply, "Verily, I say unto you, I know you not" !

Let us, brethren, learn to watch and to wait, as well as to struggle and contend, let us sleep in our armour, let us work with the sword girt upon our thigh. Let us have our lamps trimmed and burning and a constant supply of oil to replenish the sinking flame, that when the great cry arises at midnight, "Behold, the bridegroom cometh ; go ye out to meet him," we may obey the call at once and without fear, that when we come to the everlasting doors we may find them open for us, and enter in, invited and willing and ready guests, to celebrate the marriage supper of the Lamb. The gates will not be for ever open, the invitation will not be for ever offered ; some, in the full glory of that glorious festival, shall lay aside their flickering lamps in the place where no *sun* is needed, for the Lord God is the light of it ; while others shall hear the distant echoes of the joy and catch faint glimmerings of the light as they wander like wandering stars in the blackness and darkness reserved for them for ever. "Watch, therefore ; for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh,"

NOTE.—Lord Lytton's *Vision of Virgins* is a poetical rendering of this parable. A reprint of it, revised by the author, may be found in the New Testament volume of Mr. Garrett Horder's *Poets' Bible*.

THE TALENTS, A PARABLE OF
THREE

BY REV. J. MORGAN GIBBON

THE TALENTS, A PARABLE OF THREE

“ And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one ; to every man according to his several ability ; and straightway took his journey.”—MATTHEW XXV. 15.

IN this story of Three Jesus Christ sets before us Christianity and the world seen from one point of view as in another parable, the story of the *Ten*, He exhibits the same facts and characters from a different standpoint.

Here He tells of a man who, before going into another country, called his own servants together, and put his goods into their keeping. Not all in one sum, however, nor to all of them collectively, but in different amounts, varying from twelve hundred pounds down to two hundred and forty pounds, according to the estimate he had formed of their respective abilities to administer money matters. Then, without one word of instruction, he went on his journey *immediately*.

The master having quitted the scene interest centres in the servants, of whom we see *three*

only. The first is one of whose ability the master has evidently a high opinion, for he has trusted him with twelve hundred pounds, which, in a country so desperately poor as Palestine then was, is a very large sum. The servant justifies his master's opinion and does well in business. So does the second with a smaller sum, a matter of four hundred and eighty pounds. Very clearly there was money to be made in that country. Given capital and industry, business was *good*. Indeed, without industry or effort of any kind one could by merely throwing the *money down* obtain interest, for the bankers would be only too glad to take any sum entrusted to their care. But, the third servant, ignoring all the openings and investments, ignoring even the existence of bankers, simply *buried* his lord's money in the earth. He made nothing of it. He, a servant, did no service whatever in his master's absence. Finally, after a long time—for such matters required time, money would not double itself in a day—the master returns, and while engaged in reckoning with his servants he reveals himself. We see clearly what manner of man *he* is. The third servant charges him with being a *hard* man, a Nabal of a master, a very Shylock, reaping in fields he did not sow, and even swooping down on barns to seize the corn he did not thrash. Well, there are such men, but this is not one of them.

He praises the first servant, who brings him a

great sum, but he awards equal praise to the second, who hands him a much smaller account, and he praises neither of them for the money he has gained, nor for the ability he has exhibited, only for the faithfulness he has shown. His emphasis is on men, not amounts. And we see partly why this is : the master is not a money-maker. He has other things, many things, greater things, in which he seeks the co-operation of men, able, if possible, but *faithful* they must be, and interested in his great schemes. Hence, he condemns the third servant, not because he has no money to hand in, but because of his idle, sullen, wicked disposition. The talent which the man brings, confident that the master will clutch at that, he does not even touch. He refuses to take it. He gave it all away, there and then, in the sight of the man himself, so that he may carry with him into the outer darkness a better knowledge of the master he has served so ill and libelled so cruelly in his heart.

Now Jesus tells that story without note or comment. He identifies none of the characters. He affords no key to the parable. He simply throws the picture on the screen and leaves interpretation and application to us.

Well, then, do you, as you look at this scene, recognise anything or any one you know ?

I.

Look at these three, with their several gifts—gifts proportioned to their abilities, but concerning which they have received no direction whatever. Do you not recognise a very characteristic feature of human life in general, and of Christian life in particular, in that ?

Fate is an immense fact. Men are not equal ; they do not *start* alike. Their abilities vary. Heredity plays a great part. Many dead men are not dead enough ; they live in the evil they have bequeathed their posterity. “ ’Tis all written on my forehead,” says the Indian fatalist. Well, a great deal is written there, and it is a scripture that cannot be broken. There are limitations in blood and brain which no amount of application can erase. Shakespeare put immortal dramas into shape with consummate ease. ’Twas written in the folds of his brain. Nature entrusted him with a thousand talents, and he doubled them without effort.

Energy and zeal can do much, *very* much, but *except in character*, the man with the two talents cannot be the equal of the man with the five.

The same holds good of Christian life.

We also have gifts *differing*. The Divine life does not annihilate individuality. The *talent* given us is just our chief natural gift raised to its highest power by the Holy Spirit, who works in us in a rational and natural manner.

A wise proverb declares that comparisons are odious. They are impious too. This vice of comparison impeaches the wisdom of God and embitters our own souls. With your eye on the five talents in yonder servant's hand, you bemoan the poverty of your own endowment—"Why have I not *his* chances, *her* position?" Well, Some One has judged otherwise; Some One who has the ordering of things, and the distribution of parts, did not think you suited for that role, *and*, the more we know of ourselves, are we not readier to acquiesce in the wisdom of the Master?

But those moneys were also given *without any instructions* whatever? Yes, that is so; a great deal of life is not covered by any special commandment. Moses sought to spread a network of laws over the whole of human life, but Jesus left much to the discretion, to the loyalty, to the instinct of service, in His people. You are not a good servant of Christ if you never do aught but what is commanded. These three were servants, his own *servants*; that fact was enough. It was a code in itself. It covered all transactions.

Strauss said that the Christian code is defective because Jesus says nothing of family life, nor of the State, nor of trade, nor of art, nor of science. No, He says nothing of those, but the man who is Christ's servant knows exactly how to trade with all those talents. They have never given a moment's difficulty to the Christian conscience. The New

Testament does not tell you in so many words what you should do with your gifts, position, influence, but you are a poor Christian if you want to be told. You are a poor Christian if you cannot guess the Master's will. Are you one of His own *servants*? Then go about your share of the work. *You* know what it is. Yes, you know!

Thinking of all the toil and the suffering that minister to our comfort, a young American philosopher asked: "Does not the acceptance of a happy life upon such terms involve a point of honour?" Exactly. And the acceptance of gifts, impulses, influences, opportunities, from the hand of God, involves a point of *honour*, especially as there is such a ready market for all these gifts, which is—

II.

The second feature of the parable.

Business was brisk, money was in great demand, in the country where those men lived. The master did not saddle them with things for which there was no market. The talents were readily negotiable, and even if a man had no great faculty for business he need not be at the trouble of digging, nor go to the expense of a napkin, he had only to let the money fall by its own weight into a bank, and others would

be only too glad to pay him for the loan ; there was such a demand for the master's money.

How true it is ! There is a ready market for every Christian gift. People will not read our books, nor even our tracts ; they will not come to hear our sermons, but there is no glut in goodness. Character finds ready acceptance ; holiness is a drug in no market ; love is as welcome as the spring sunshine. We try to exclude the fog, but we open to the sun. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, temperance, against such there is no law," says the apostle. No, nor is there any prejudice nor doubt.

Agnosticism does not question, nor Atheism deny them. There is no duty on them in any port ; every market is free, every door open to them.

In religion as in business it is the *rubbish* that is unsaleable—old, age-yellowed dogmas, with erroneous face-values but which represent no longer any assets—and the church that depends on these is surely heading for bankruptcy. But oh ! what a demand there is for every Christian gift ! What an opening for Christian character, influence, and disposition ; and if you and I still do *nothing*—do nothing when much can be done *with little or no effort*, what chance have we of approval and promotion when the Master makes up our account ?

III.

For all this is prospective.

This is the Master's recruiting ground. The utmost done here is a little thing, "Thou hast been faithful over a *few* things." Yet he had charge of five talents and had made five others. Oh yes, but a trifle all the same—"I will set thee over *MANY* things"—"So many worlds; so much to do; such things to be." Mr. Alfred Russell Wallace, one of the great names of our age, in a remarkable article declares that as astronomical research proceeds it reveals the *finality* of this universe. The further out you get the fewer the worlds are, till, like the straggling lights on the outskirts of a city, they die away altogether, and the new telescopes see through rifts of the Milky Way into sheer darkness, and that there is strong reason to believe that our earth is, after all, the centre of the solar system, the object of which is to develop intelligence and spiritual life. Thus science, after all its wandering, is swinging back to the standpoint of the eighth Psalm.

But whether that is so or not, intelligence and character are developed here with a view to other and wider fields of action. The fidelity tested by the few things here is destined for service in many things. "My belief is," said Emerson, "that heaven is not melodrama at all," No, it is a place of busy,

happy life. "How busy he is to-night!" said the watchers by Sir Humphrey Davy's bier. "Greet the unseen with a cheer," was Browning's last message. "Strive and thrive," cry "Speed—*fight on* for ever, *There* as here!"

"So many worlds ; so much to do," said Tennyson. Oh yes, the real life is yet to be. Here we deal with counters ; the real wealth is there. Let us be "skilful money-changers." Let us at least be faithful servants. "What is the use of our reckoning? God will make up our accounts," says poor Maslova, in Tolstoy's painful, powerful book.

Oh yes, God *will* make up *our* accounts. He will reckon not by talents gained but by the unseen loyalties and fidelities of the soul—the unbuilt temples of the heart. "Lord, increase our faith!"

THE PARABLES OF POUNDS AND
TALENTS

By REV. THOMAS G. SELBY

THE PARABLES OF POUNDS AND TALENTS

MATTHEW xxv. 14-30 ; LUKE xix. 11-28

SOME students of the synoptical gospels regard Matthew's version of the parable of the Talents and Luke's version of the parable of the Pounds as variants of one original tradition. The third evangelist, it is said, translates Jewish into Roman currency for the benefit of his Gentile readers, and interweaves with his recital a second parable of rebellious citizens who repudiated the kingship of their rightful ruler. Some of the details were changed as the discourse passed from one to another, and these changes are stereotyped in the report of the later evangelist. Such changes are not impossible and would not discredit the validity of the narrative. But whilst there are obvious similarities in the two parables, they are not identical ; the places in which they were said to have been spoken differ, and the audiences who listened to them. Matthew's parable was spoken to

a select company of the disciples on the Mount of Olives, and Luke's to the multitude in the vicinity of Jericho. And this circumstance is reflected in several of the subordinate features of the two parables.

Matthew's parable was addressed to the twelve, and points more especially to the peculiar endowments bestowed upon them, so that they might continue the Master's work during His absence from them. The distribution of gifts is unequal and is regulated by past proofs of capacity, and the final gain is rigidly proportioned to the original gift, five doubling itself into ten and two into four. In the parable of the pounds ten servants come into the field of observation; may we not say the entire household? Each man receives precisely the same sum with which to trade in his master's absence, and the increase is free and unlimited. The pounds not only double themselves but in the care of one man the one pound becomes ten, and in the care of another the same amount grows into five. Has the rule of compound interest time to work in the one parable, and that of simple interest only in the other? or must we seek some other explanation? We may perhaps find these variations suggest important lessons.

At any rate the lesson in both cases is the same, the need for unsleeping diligence and fidelity. Both parables are intended to guard against the temptation to indolence arising from misjudgment

of the master and misgivings concerning his kindness and integrity.

It has been pointed out by recent writers that the current interpretation of these parables is inaccurate and misses the keynote the Master Himself strikes. We are reminded by preachers of our natural gifts and providential influence, and told to use learning and intellectual power, prestige and wealth, to the glory of God, and for the good of men. But the gifts here entrusted to the servants are not gifts of birth, temperament, social opportunity, for they immediately link themselves with the Master's journey into a far country, a feature in the picture obviously pointing to the Lord's removal from the disciples till His return at the second Advent. This erroneous view has left its imprint upon the English language, for we are accustomed to speak of the orator, the statesman, the philosopher, and the historian, as a man of "talents." "Pounds" and "talents" obviously mean something bestowed upon disciples, at the time of their separation from the Master, which they did not possess before, and which was to determine their responsibility and mould their eternal future. There was no redistribution of brain-power, of wealth, honour, prestige, or opportunity, at the time of the Lord's return to the presence of His Father. The dull man was not made brilliant, the poor man wealthy, the mean man honoured and influential in the sense in which the word "talent" is popularly used. "Pounds" and "talents" are obviously the

gifts arising within the hearts of the disciples when the Spirit, which was the Master's farewell promise and bequest, came to dwell within them, or what is practically the same thing, the new truths ministered by the Spirit and the new powers introduced into human nature. This secular interpretation of the two parables arose in those ages of obscurity and misapprehension when the heads of the Church, in virtue of the offices to which they had been ordained, were supposed to possess the Spirit in a pre-eminent degree, and the common follower of Jesus Christ was required to do the bidding of the priest and employ his temporal resources for the benefit of the Church. The lay disciple was scarcely looked upon as a direct recipient from Jesus Christ. The Spirit of God may hallow and elevate the natural faculties of the mind and help a man to be useful through the power which comes to him by birth and providential lot in life, but the gifts indicated in the parables are distinctively gifts of the Spirit, for they are linked in a specific and expressive way with the Lord's separation from the disciples and His pilgrimage into the far-off land to receive His Divine enthronement and investiture.

The two parables, the first popular in its application and the second more or less select, represent respectively personal and official grace,

I.

The grace that brings salvation, which is the subject of the parable of the pounds, is given to all, and given in exactly equal measure.

There is a note of universality in the opening episode. The nobleman had ten servants, and a trust was committed to each. Every man received a pound—no more and no less. He did not discriminate between head-servants and under-servants, between those who had been with him for a lifetime and those who had just been taken into His household, those who were quick and those who were dull, those whose record had been excellent and those who had fallen short of the highest standard. This can mean nothing less than the grace required to build up and achieve personal character, which is the basis of all high degrees of responsibility. The common salvation is foreshadowed in this distribution which leaves no member of the household destitute of that through which he must prove his fitness for honour in the new kingdom. All begin at the same starting-point. Whatever differences may afterwards arise they arise through varying degrees of fidelity in the use of the Master's pound. There is no respect of persons, and elementary grace is vouchsafed with impartial liberality. The grace that may fit for different vocations varies with the requirement of the vocation, but the grace which

enables every man to make the best of his probationary life is given according to one standard. Paul, John, Augustine, Luther, Wesley, had not a more munificent capital with which to win personal character and salvation than the rest of us. The special gifts which belonged to these men were gifts that fitted them for the special work they were appointed in the order of Divine providence to carry through. The same degree of the Spirit, the same sanctifying efficacy of the truth, the same gifts of redemption, are offered to each of us ; all start at the same post and on the same plane. Those bathed in the brightest light of the throne began on the same rung of the ladder where the last novice in the family of God stands. There is no distinction when the gifts are designed for the moral and spiritual needs of the recipient. The great saints of history began with the pound—not a penny more nor a penny less.

II.

The parable of the talents suggests the thought that the grace which equips for a peculiar service, and a special vocation, the Lord, in the exercise of His holy and righteous judgment, sees fit to vary.

It was addressed to a group of apostles, and is obviously coloured by the thought of the gifts

entrusted to them and their successors in work for service and ministry. Selected members of the household are chosen to be stewards of their Master's possessions, one receiving five, another two, and another one talent. And these varying sums, which express the several gifts of the ascending Lord to His chief disciples, correspond with capacities already tested. The Holy Ghost, bestowed for the work of the ministry, spiritualises and elevates existing faculties rather than creates a new order of aptitudes in the mind. The distribution must vary, because the Lord knows that those to whom the trust is committed vary in temperament, in constitutional fitness, in capacity for enthusiasm and self-surrender, in the power of influencing those to whom they are sent. The different positions they have already filled in the Master's household, and the new places they are appointed to make for themselves in His kingdom, require different capacities. Intense powers and combinations of high qualities are necessary for some fields of action into which Christ's disciples must find their way. Here the Master's sovereignty of choice, His discriminating selection, His right to mete out gifts and endowments, asserts itself. He moulds them according to His will in the processes of their first making, and moulds them yet again in the spiritual resources of which they become the depositories. Peculiar inspirations come which fit them for the emergencies of their providential spheres. Here the principle of

inequality is allowed to assert itself for a time. The popular parable teaches that the power to be good is conveyed to all men alike, whilst the other parable teaches that the power to do good is conveyed to men in unequal degrees at the sovereign discretion of the great Lord Himself.

III.

A comparison of the two parables tends to show that the conditions which arise from peculiar endowments, determined by the sovereign discretion of the Master, afford scope for a more limited progress and recompense than those conditions of common grace under which each man receives alike.

The talents, which signify grace for official service, admit of being doubled only, two becoming four and five ten ; whilst the pounds, which signify the grace given to every man so that he may achieve holiness of character in the course of his converse with the world, admits of multiplication, one becoming five, and one multiplying itself even ten times. There is the fullest scope for human freedom and the largest range for human progress in connection with those gifts of the ascended King which are bestowed upon all members of His household alike.

What is the law at work which confines advance-

ment in the one case within predetermined limits, and leaves it practically boundless in the other case? In those special anointings and baptisms for official service bestowed by Jesus Christ, the healer, the prophet, the discernor of the heart, is to some extent passive under His inspiration. He is the instrument of a hand which has taken possession of him. The Spirit in His extraordinary gifts has in part superseded the man, and whilst there is still scope for personal fidelity, the extraordinary vocation allows less of the inner, conscious man and his character to come into play than the ordinary vocation. His endowment is akin to genius, which in strict equity may be less suitable for reward than hard, painstaking work. Two talents may become four, but not ten, as in the case of the pounds. A force of predetermination is at work which to some extent limits the province of the moral powers.

On the other hand, in the universal grace which is the root from which all saving character grows, the range of increase is unlimited. We may not all be qualified to be apostles in the range, significance, and quality of our work, but we may be apostles, and even surpass apostles, in the highest fruitions of character. The cumulative blessedness of personal sanctity acquired and maintained in intercourse with the world may transcend the achievements realised through the high endowments which fit for office. The truth is one with that taught by Paul—

love is a more excellent thing than the best gifts. The initial disparities which appear in the natural and spiritual aptitudes of Christ's disciples disappear in those transcendent possibilities contained in the growth of character.

Ralph Waldo Emerson somewhere asks, "Are not all our circlets of will as so many eddies rounded in by one great circle of necessity?" The great circle of necessity at least rounds the sphere within which we exercise our special gifts into a much narrower circlet than the sphere within which we exercise common gifts making for spiritual progress and ennoblement. The gift of office may be doubled, but the gift of character may be multiplied many times, and the interest is compound.

IV.

These gifts, both common and special, must be exercised in our conversation with the world.

It is only thus that they can be made to abound yet more and more. A recluse could not be a successful man of business and find out good, profitable opportunities for the investment of his capital. The religion which is to save and immortalise us must be carried into the world and professed and practised upon every suitable occasion. The power to be good, diligent, faithful, unselfish,

helpful to others, has been bestowed upon all who call Christ "Master." We cannot minimise our responsibilities by shirking the Christian profession. Perhaps if we do not call ourselves Christians the world will be less disposed to be hard upon us for our shortcomings, but God will nevertheless pronounce condemnation against us. We have freely received at the hands of Jesus Christ, and the forces lie within our grasp which should beget faith, sanctity, moral comeliness, gracious ministration to the temporal and spiritual wants of others. We cannot fall back upon the conditions of a primitive natural life and assume that no responsibility can be made to attach to us. A doctor would not escape blame if he refused to place his gifts at the service of the community in time of public disaster. He may have put no name-plate upon his gate and lit no lamp as a sign of his profession, but within a secluded chamber of his house there are the diplomas which attest his qualifications and all the resources and facilities needed in the practice of his healing craft. We cannot act as though we had not received the Spirit and His gifts. Those gifts may be kept in the background, hidden away in the secret chambers of our consciousness, but they constitute us responsible—responsible for the use of all with which the Master has enriched us—responsible for those ministrations called for by the needs of the world. Pounds and talents are ours by the bequest of the Master Himself. A man is sometimes vic-

timised in his secular investments, but no man occupies such a position in these parables. Every man who tried succeeded in his degree, and the only failures were the failures of the slothful and unwilling.

V.

In each parable a man is painted for us who receives the grace of his Lord in vain.

In the Master's judgment the failure was because of ingrained sluggishness; in the culprit's own judgment because he had reason to think his Lord's ways wanting in reason and perfect equity. Perhaps the temptation to take this resentful view may have come to the others, but they were too strenuous in temper to heed it. What could have given colour to this unhappy misconception? Had Jesus given to His least attached servants the slightest reason for suspicion and distrust? If the man could have been heard at length in explanation of his plea he might have pointed to the conditions of hostility and distress in which Jesus left His disciples when He returned to the presence of the Father in the far-off worlds. He had not sent His servants to prove their trustworthiness in the smoothest of all possible dispensations. They had looked forward to a different kind of life when they had first welcomed Him as the sent of God and come under the rule of His household. His

teaching, too, had been unduly strict and exacting for common flesh and blood. It was the easiest thing in the world for a lethargic man to think that his Master was expecting too much. The scale of His requirements was unreasonable, especially under such conditions as pressed upon them. In the parable of the pounds, a parable in which two separate scenes seem to be interwoven, it is perhaps open to us to think that the disaffection of the citizens who sent a messenger saying, "We will not have this man to reign over us," infected the sluggish servant, and the temptation to take this fatal and soul-destroying view of the Master's character came reinforced by all the sophistry and ill-will of the world. The judgment of the unbelieving world helped to undermine his loyalty and confirm him in his sluggish neglect of the endowments put within his control. Our views of Jesus Christ and of the gifts He has entrusted to our care will be determined by the moral habits we form and the importance we attach to the opinions of a world in revolt against His authority. The temptation presents itself to most of us to think we are called upon to use our gifts under harsh and unpromising conditions, and that the Lord's demands are unduly stringent and exacting.

VI.

In both parables a feature is introduced which is not without its difficulties, the hint to the slothful man that he might have taken the money, with which he was entrusted, to the bankers rather than let it lie idle.

This looks like suggesting a middle course, which fails of heroic goodness on the one hand and permits the ignoble repudiation of responsibility on the other. It is not quite certain that this part of the parable was intended to be didactic, for it is only in allegories that every feature introduced enforces a lesson. In the parable touches are often brought in to give artistic completeness to the picture.

Mediaeval writers say that Jesus meant to intimate that if the slothful man had these views he should have joined a brotherhood and rendered allegiance to a spiritual director, so escaping personal responsibility for the use of his gifts. This can scarcely have been our Lord's intention, and those who extol monasticism will scarcely be prepared to admit that it is only the second and third grades of piety that are found there. The man who takes the money entrusted to him for investment according to his own judgment, and places it on deposit with a banker because he has no confidence in himself or in his principal, puts his powers as a trustee in commission. He is too timid to invest himself, too

much afraid of blame, and he thinks it better to bank another's money than to bury it. This is not the type of procedure Jesus expects from His followers. Our religious service must be the fruit of personal judgment. Perhaps in the earlier stages of our development we are compelled to rely upon the judgment of others, but we must rise at length into independent thought and action. We can only transfer our responsibility to others at a grave loss to ourselves and a grave abatement of our blessedness. If the lord had wished his money to be banked he would have done it himself. Some people's religion is derivative only ; they have put into commission the gifts which should make them devout, diligent, and faithful, and if they escape condemnation at last the recompense gained will be of inferior splendour. Our trust is personal, and we must use an independent, personal judgment in all questions of spiritual life and enterprise, and not fall back upon substituted service.

And this is true of the official gifts we are called to use. The Church may act as a labour-bureau and direct us to the fields where there is a dearth of service. All the members of the household must of course act in mutual good-will, but each man must discover his own personal aptitudes and find out his providential grooves of ministry. These three servants, as depicted in the parable, acted separately and did not seek to form themselves into a guild. They were in good fellowship with each

other, ready to give mutual counsel when desired, and there were no schisms or quarrels. But one was not slavishly subjected to another, or the master's plan of testing character would have been thwarted. You cannot test men when you turn them into machines to serve others. We must not delegate our gifts or put the unknown powers entrusted to us by Jesus Christ into commission. Moses did this to some extent when he asked that Aaron might become his spokesman. It was well that he should be diffident, but it would have been better for him to trust in God, who was with his mouth, than in the eloquent Aaron, who did not always prove the helper he might have been. We never know ourselves and our own powers when others choose our vocations for us. Undue deference to somebody else's judgments may put us into a wrong and comparatively unprofitable groove. We can take and ought to take all available advice without surrendering our own right of decision and making over our trust to some reputable banker. The man who made five pounds took advice, as did the man who made two ; he kept eyes and ears open and acted on his own initiative. Use your own gifts, and never cast yourself upon traditional authority, however safe and sacred it may be. Aim high, and avoid the mediocrity implied in putting the Lord's pounds and talents to the bankers.

VII.

The closing words of the parables light up the subject of the future and its rewards.

Our imagination is baffled when it tries to conceive the veiled, mysterious life which is to succeed the present. It will at least bring new vocations, for which we have trained ourselves here by a right use of the Master's gifts. There will be no break in our spiritual continuity. The common gifts will be followed by rule over cities in the kingdom of our Lord. Sovereignty over many things will recompense the right use of those spiritual faculties with which we have been endowed. The glorified Master will admit faithful disciples into participation with His joy. It is in the sacred enterprises which occupy us now and call forth the spiritual possibilities placed within us that we get the keynote for the everlasting life which is at hand.

THE SEED GROWING SECRETLY

By REV. E. GRIFFITH-JONES, B.A.

THE SEED GROWING SECRETLY

"The earth beareth fruit of herself ; first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear."—MARK iv. 28.

THE seven parables of growth uttered by our Lord deal each with separate conditions under which the kingdom of grace develops in the human heart and the world. There is in all a fixed factor—the seed or the principle of life—the pure Divine influence at work in humanity, always the same and always beneficent ; and in some there is an inconstant factor—the varying response of the heart to that influence. Man changes. God is always the same, ever faithful, ever sure. In three this inconstant element is very marked. We see it most clearly in the parable of the sower. Men do not receive the good seed with equal welcome and responsiveness ; some are shallow ; others are hard ; others are preoccupied ; others are warm and cherishful of every Divine influence and truth. In the parable of the tares, we are taught that the soil that can grow good seed can also grow bad ; and that in the tangle of human nature there is an inextricable mingling of holy and evil things, which God alone

can sift and separate, and that only at the Last Day.

In the parable of the barren fig-tree we see the evil principle apparently triumphant, and in the husbandman who, having done his best for a tree for three years, wishes to cut it down, we see our too ready despair at the lack of results, while in the more patient dresser of the vineyard, who pleads for another chance, we find a suggestion that God is more patient and hopeful than man. These three parables stand by themselves ; they show what happens when man works against, or only fitfully with, God. But when God and man work in harmony, what happens ? Then the kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which has a pervasive influence on the whole lump in which it is hidden, transforming it throughout. There is no limit to this transforming power, but as the parable of the mustard-seed shows, beginning with tiny things it goes on to the greatest, and grows from an insignificant beginning into a magnificent result. In the sixth parable, that of the "fig-tree and all the trees," we come within sight of the issue rather than of the sowing or the process of growth ; "when the fig-tree and all the trees now shoot forth, ye see of your own selves that the summer is at hand" ; that there are times when it is apparent to all eyes that great issues are impending in the spiritual world.

Where, then, does this particular parable under

our notice come in ? It stands by itself, in many respects, and the lesson it teaches is intermediate between the extreme points touched by the others.

In this parable we have three active elements. There is the husbandman, the seed, and the soil. We see the farmer in three moods. First, he is busy sowing, at the right time and season ; secondly, he is inactive and can do nothing but wait ; thirdly, he is suddenly alive to the fact that harvest has come, and that he must again be busy. We see the soil in three stages : first being prepared, then sown, finally reacting on the seed and giving it an opportunity of expanding and multiplying, according to the slow but sure activity of the seasons. And we see the seed quickening under this stimulus into life, and passing through the three normal stages or periods of growth, "first the blade, and then the ear, and lastly the full corn in the ear." And so the process is complete, and the harvest is gathered in. It is a pure idyll of country life, such as takes place on every farm every year since husbandry began ; and those of us who have had the good fortune to have been brought up in the country know that in these few graphic and beautiful words the annual drama of Nature is crystallised into a bright and vivid picture.

I.

From this parable I wish to point out four connected lessons. The first is this: that there is in human nature a normal and active response to Divine truth and influence. Spiritual growth, like natural, has an element of spontaneity in it.

“The earth bringeth forth fruit of herself.”

This, indeed, is thought by many to be the central thought in the parable. The seed is not foreign to the soil, it is akin to it; the one is pre-ordained, pre-adapted to the other. Till the seed is planted it is a mere inert possibility; even if it germinates it can come to nothing. Till it receives the seed the soil, too, is, for purposes of growth, nothing better than a possibility; its forces lie dormant, its potencies are hidden, they cannot assert themselves. But bring the two together, under proper conditions, and with due preparation, and a miracle takes place—as true a miracle as though one should rise from the grave. The dead earth lives; the sleeping seed quickens; the two react on each other, because they are made for each other, and need each other, and cannot come to anything except in twinship with each other; and behold, in due time the golden grain “full in the ear.”

So true is this of the gospel and the human

heart, that it is impracticable to deal with the possibilities of either till we can see their mutual inter-action. It has been the cardinal sin of many thinkers in all ages to deal both with human nature and with the gospel as though they could be understood each as a thing apart. The gospel has been considered as a system of truth ; its evidences have been discussed ; its story has been examined and pulled to pieces ; and so it becomes an abstract thing, a cloud hanging in the air, beautiful, but unsubstantial, and capable of being explained away at a breath of doubt. And man has been dealt with as a separate religious unit, complete in himself, and so full of insoluble mysteries and contradictions, and baffling enigmas. All this is beside the mark. If you want to understand the seed, you must study it as it grows in the soil, and you will know more about seed and soil in a few months than you would in a thousand years of dissection in the laboratory. The vital principle of the seed can never be discovered by chemical analysis ; it is a fact in biology, not chemistry. The meaning of the gospel can never be grasped by dissection and analysis, and the mere tests of history applied to what took place nineteen centuries ago. If you want to understand it you must study it as it incarnates itself in the men and women of to-day ; you must test its principles by applying them to the practical problems of society to-day ; for it is a fact of spiritual biology, and not of philosophy, or

of abstract science. I believe that this is being more widely acknowledged to-day than ever before. It is being seen that the gospel in the Bible is like seed in the granary ; and that to realise its Divine potency it must be studied as it works and grows in the actual world of men. When that order of facts has been truly and fairly classified, we may expect a new era for theology, and a new development for religion.

But this is in passing. What we have before us is the fact that the gospel of Jesus Christ is a Divine influence adapted to the needs of humanity, and that there is a real capacity in man to respond to it. Plant it, and give it room, and something takes place. The soul is quickened ; sleeping qualities begin to sprout ; character begins to form ; a new order of facts arises ; man's highest nature starts in a fresh line of evolution. Give God and man fair play, and they will come together, and out of this wondrous marriage of earth and heaven, that ripest and sweetest product of the universe, *a Christian*, will come to the birth. By no artificial mechanism can this process be carried out ; it is a part of nature ; it is "one with the blowing clover and the falling rain" ; and though it is full of mystery, it is also full of light. "The earth bringeth forth fruit of herself" ; and so does the heart of man in whom is planted the potent seed of Divine truth and grace."

II.

The second principle contained in this parable is this: *You cannot hasten the process of spiritual, any more than you can the process of natural, growth.*

“So is the kingdom of God ; as if a man should cast seed into the ground, and should sleep, and rise night and day, and the seed should spring, and grow up, *how*, knoweth not *he*.”

That is to say, having planted the seed of truth, we have to wait for results. The farmer here, like every other farmer, has little or nothing to do till the harvest, once he has fairly brought earth and seed together. He has simply to leave things alone. The law of growth is beyond his ken. He should study well the right way to plough, and harrow, and plant ; he should see to it that his seed is good ; then he can afford to be idle, for there is little more that he can do, till the hour when the ripe corn stands full in the ear.

It is on this point that the chief emphasis in the parable must be laid.

And how true it all is ! How much has to take place in the religious life over which we have no effectual control, indeed, no control at all ! We speak foolish things, sometimes, about a man being master of his fate. We talk as though we could do as we like with ourselves ; as though the whole of our complex

nature were like a keyboard on which we can play any tune we like. Those who imagine this have not mastered the first and last great lesson of self-knowledge, which is, that a man's control over himself is of the slightest, that it is concerned almost altogether with the *beginnings* of thought, and feeling, and motive. When we turn our little lamp of self-consciousness into the dark chamber within, how little we can really see, and how much of that is something which seems to go on in a way we cannot control! There is a whole world of activity in every man's heart and life of which he is purely a spectator. Thoughts come to him, he knows not whence; impulses float and swing and bubble like the eddies of a whirlpool rising from hidden depths, and he can give no account of them; and when his will acts it is often in directions other than that which he really desires or intends. Convictions, too, ripen by methods we cannot explain; life shapes itself out to our thought in fresh aspects, not because we have carefully and consciously reviewed the evidence, but because we have left it alone. We often watch transformations of opinion and standpoint in other men as life goes on. The Sceptic becomes a Believer, the Radical turns Tory, the Evangelical broadens into a Latitudinarian. Ask them to explain the process; can they give an account of it? In one case out of ten, perhaps, a man can tell us something about it. But usually only the vaguest account can be given; the man

himself often can tell less about it than his friends ; the thing has taken place in those regions of our life that lie beyond the reach of conscious thought ; we see the result, but can tell little about the process.

All this illustrates our subject. "The seed springeth up, he knoweth not how." You cannot tell how it happens, and, what is more, you cannot hasten the process. There are some departments in nature where knowledge is power ; there are others where knowledge is as impotent as ignorance, and therefore we can afford to be ignorant. The farmer in this parable is a good specimen of his class ; the words which describe his ignorance of the laws of growth are put into a curious order—"how, knoweth not he"—suggesting that as a farmer he not only does not know, but does not care about knowing, because it would make no difference to the result if he did. He just waits, and does not interfere, well assured from long experience that time must elapse ere he can expect any results, and that Nature, being entrusted to do a certain work, will perform her part all the better the less she is interfered with.

Is there not a priceless hint here ? Is there not a perpetual tendency in us to interfere too much with the work of God's Spirit in the heart ? Is there not a meddlesomeness on the part of many parents regarding their children's religious condition, which often has the most disastrous

effects? There is a time when we cannot be too anxious or too busy in implanting true noble principles, in sowing the Divine seed, in our little ones' souls. Having done that, it is our duty to give God and Nature their chance. I believe there are few greater mistakes that parents and teachers often fall into than to make young people feel that they are being watched, and shielded, and dragoned into goodness. It is always resented with bitterness, for there is an instinct in all of us that there is something sacred within which can only come to its own by being left alone. You can make a slave law-abiding by taking him about in handcuffs or frightening him with the terrors of the law, but you cannot make him a good citizen that way. Goodness must be self-directive in order to be real. Therefore respect your children's individuality; give them a healthy scope and liberty, and you will be doing more than some of you think to make them grow up pure and strong, true and tender, self-respecting, because you show that you respect the self that God has given them.

And be patient with your own souls. If you know that at heart you are right with God, do not expect that you will be able to solve every doubt, and settle every difficulty, and master every duty, and grow perfect all at once. "Rest in the Lord, wait patiently for Him," and "He shall direct thy paths."

III.

The third principle we find in this parable is this: The first results of spiritual sowing are strangely unlike the seed sown or the fruit to be presently reaped.

“The earth beareth fruit of herself; first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear.”

The farmer is not surprised at seeing the blossom or blade, however unlike the seed it may be, because he has seen it before, and knows what is to come at last. But we are not permitted to live more than once on earth, and when we see the first results of our sowing in the kingdom, we have no past experience to guide us; so we often make great mistakes, and fall into a deep discouragement, for the reaction to our efforts is very different from what we had expected, and nearly always we are disappointed.

Let us consider a remarkable illustration. In his lecture on the Mystery of Life and its Arts, Ruskin tells us that he gave the ten best years of his life to the task of convincing the British public of the excellence of the works of the greatest English artist. He wrote some of the finest books in the English language during those ten years—when he was between twenty and thirty years of age—and then he discovered that his work had been all in vain. Many laughed at him;

no one seemed to have understood him ; and it is not too much to say that this disappointment cast a shadow over the whole of his after-life. As a matter of fact, Ruskin did not fail in his purpose. His mistake—and a lamentable one it was for his own happiness—was to expect that the immediate effect of his writing would be this and that ; and because it was different he was plunged into the deepest despondency. “First the blade.” All high influences are transformed ere they can reappear in their original condition. “That which thou sowest is not quickened except it die.” It must sink out of sight, reappear in alien forms, pass through many stages. There are few men who at present are more profoundly affecting English thought than Ruskin. He has taught thousands to view nature with a new eye, to find beauty in the ploughed field, in the wild hedgerow, in the wayside cottage ; his teaching on social ethics is breathing a fresh and sweeter life into the dry bones of social and political science ; he is helping to make the relation of master and man a totally different thing because of one charming little book of his ; and though the result is still far off, it is sure to come, in the shape of kindlier feelings between man and man, of more beautiful cities to live in, of a more sacred and ennobled art, of a healthier religion.

So let us be patient in our little corner of the kingdom, and do our sowing in such a way that

we shall be willing to wait for the harvest. We need faith in training our children, in teaching wayward youths, in preaching the gospel, in the culture of our own lives—

“For God fulfils Himself in many ways,
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.”

IV.

And now let us give a glance at the last scene
in this pregnant little parable.

The farmer has been sleeping and rising, and watching the growth of the seed for long months. He has not been impatient, however ; he knows what is coming. And now, at last, he awakes one fine morning and realises that the hour has arrived. “Lo, the ripe corn in the ear !”—such is the picturesque rendering of the Greek—“at last the harvest !”

That is to say, tedious processes arrive at sudden crises ; after long and tedious waiting results come with a rush ; what still seemed far off is at last at hand.

Again, how true to life this is ! We go on year by year, waiting, working, expecting, and nothing seems to come. Heart and flesh fail us. We cry in our agony, “How long, O Lord, how long ?” Suddenly the clouds break and the rain is gone,

and God permits us to enter into His fields bending with the heavenly grain. Such moments, when they come, make the joy of harvest a poor simile to represent the glorious reality. Heaven is already his who is thus privileged to see of the travail of his soul, so that he is satisfied. Let us, then, learn patience, that the great Husbandman may bring our lives to ripeness in His own good time and season !

THE TWO DEBTORS

BY REV. ALBERT GOODRICH, D.D.



THE TWO DEBTORS;

OR, MUCH FORGIVENESS, MUCH LOVE

"There was a certain creditor which had two debtors; the one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Tell me, therefore, which of them will love him most?" etc.—LUKE vii. 41-50.

"HER sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much." "Then," says the Roman Catholic Church, "love is the ground of forgiveness; it is not by faith but by love, the doing of works of mercy, that we are saved." They interpret the words, "Her sins are forgiven, for she loved much," as meaning the cause of her forgiveness was her love. But if we say, "The sun is risen, for it is broad day," we do not mean that the broad day is the cause of the sun rising, but that the broad day is the evidence of the sun rising. So when Christ says, "Her sins are forgiven, for she loved much," He does not mean that love is the cause, but that it is the evidence, of her forgiveness.

Moreover, as though to prevent the Roman error, our Lord, in verse 50, says to the woman, "Thy

faith hath saved thee." If Rome were correct Christ would have said, "Thy love hath saved thee."

And further, if the first part of the verse, "Her sins are forgiven, for she loved much," should be interpreted, "Her love obtained forgiveness," then the latter part of the verse, viz., "To whom little is forgiven the same loveth little," should have been, "He who loveth little, obtains little forgiveness."

The aim and motive of the parable is to show that great love results from the consciousness of great forgiveness. The man who is forgiven £500 has usually more love than the man who is forgiven £50. The essence of the good life, and its sufficient motive power, is love. The end of the commandment is love. And the word of the gospel of Jesus Christ is not, "First be submissive to the Church and charitable towards men," but "First accept your free forgiveness, realise therein God's great love, and you will be prompted to all goodness." The woman realised she had much forgiven, therefore she loved much.

A good disposition, a just and benevolent spirit, holy love, is what we all feel is the fount of good life. But how difficult is this to attain; our hearts are naturally so apathetic towards God and goodness; our lives are so vexed and burdened by others; things so frequently fall out against us, that it is not easy to get and to keep a heart free from anger, full, indeed, of trust towards God and of charity towards men. The only way of securing this

unspeakable blessing is to realise the greatness of God's forgiveness ; and to realise that we must realise the greatness of our sin, that there is much forgiven.

Let us consider some points helpful to this realisation of the greatness of our debt or sin.

I.

Our parable suggests that there is a difference between the amounts of sin of different persons.

Some, however, speak as if we all are equally, to the same degree, sinners. The well-known verse seems to proceed on this view :—

“The dying thief rejoiced to see
That fountain in his day ;
And there have I, as vile as he,
Washed all my sins away.”

I trust, brethren, we know something of that overwhelming sense of sin in which all thought of the difference in amount between our sin and that of others is not thought of. Still, between the disobedience of the two men, one of whom knew not and the other knew his Master's will, there is, says Jesus Christ, a difference of guilt. We all have spiritual debts enough to make us utterly bankrupt ; we all are helpless to do aught

to pay off these debts; but our Lord in this parable recognises that the debts of one may be as fifty and of another as five. Between Simon the Pharisee and the woman, who was a sinner, there was a difference. Simon, though a Pharisee, does not appear to have been a hypocrite. He was probably an upright, honourable man, with some appreciation of Christ's teaching, willing to show hospitality to Jesus as a great teacher, yet cautious not to identify himself with His teaching. He, therefore, did not give Him the usual welcome. He was not a very spiritual man—not at all above the prejudices of his time and class—yet a moral, honourable man. The poor woman was a sinner; she was not respectable, honourable; sinned against, doubtless, but still herself one who had broken down natural barriers against sin, and had polluted her soul, so that, poor woman, she was something of an outcast from society and from God, yet, withal, possessing a heart capable of a pure and great affection.

Be it so, that between Simon and this woman there was a difference in the amount of debt or sin, yet even Simon had much sin. Of the woman Christ said, "Her sins, which are many." He did not then say of Simon, which would have been the natural opposite, "Thy sins which are few." He simply said, "To whom little is forgiven the same loveth little." The person may feel that he has had little forgiven, and in truth he may not be so heavily in

debt as some, still he has had much forgiven. Yes, whatever our sin, it is much. Do we feel that ?

II.

In estimating sin we must distinguish between great sin and gross sin.

Drunkenness, fornication, profanity, are gross sins. Enmity against God, pride, covetousness, vindictiveness, are great sins. Satan is not a gross sinner, but he is a great sinner. Satan does not get drunk, he is not a fornicator, but he is full of enmity against God and hate of men. Satan is not brutish, but he is fiendish ; he is not a sot, but he is a liar ; he is not immoral, but he is proud, malignant. The sin of the spirit, though not so gross, is greater than the sin of the flesh. Simon, therefore, with all his respectability, may have been even a greater sinner than the woman who was a sinner. Judge not after the flesh, but after the spirit ; judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment. We are not gross sinners, we are respectable. Still we may be great sinners. Are we proud in spirit, selfish in heart ? Have we reverence towards God ? Are we hard, wrathful, vindictive ? Our sin is not bestial, but is it satanic ? Have we not much to be forgiven ?

III.

Moreover, sin may be very superficial or deep seated.

“That disagreeable word, that little unkindness, was just a slip of the tongue or a little forgetfulness, really nothing more, his heart is quite right towards you.” Well, such a thing is easily forgiven. But if, on the contrary, you know that word or act to be the outcome of deep alienation of heart towards you, or of desire to hurt you, it is hard to forgive, for the little things, the few sparks, reveal the lake of fire below burning against you. We fail here and there towards God ; we forget God now and again ; that alone is not the greatness of our sin. The greatness of our sin is this, that these failures spring from, are the natural outcome and conclusive evidence of, a heart naturally estranged from the good God, our Father ; that at bottom, we, our sinful selves, do not want God ; that indeed we will have none of His reproof. This verily is much sin.

A bottomless pit of evil is the sinful heart. Had our circumstances been less favourable to goodness, had our temptations been stronger, God only knows into what depths of evil we might have fallen ; had we been in Herod’s place, we might have out-heroded Herod ; had we been in this woman’s position, we might have sunk even lower than she.

Looking at the smouldering fires of evil within, noting there, also, the amount of combustible material, verily we have much to be forgiven.

IV.

The greatness of our sin further appears when we consider the greatness of the claim it violates.

For a young man to strike a woman is base, but to strike his mother was at one time a crime punishable with death. Closer than mother stands to son does God stand to us. He is the Father of our spirits. His love towards us is infinite. His law for us is our liberty and protection. His claim, therefore, upon our love and obedience is simply infinite. To be indifferent to such claims, to despise such rights over us, what must be the force of the sinful heart ! Moreover, what a fearful element of personal antagonism to God there is in our sin, for our sin is not simply the breaking of some regulation that does not affect the person of God ; our sin directly resists His will, grieves His heart, thwarts His plans, and insults His person. Our sin, in not trusting God, is personal ; it is not like a crime, a mere state affair ; it is not like a fault, a matter between equals. Our sin, in not trusting God, is a defiance of the will and an offence against the person of the all-loving Father and the almighty King of us all ; it strikes at the heart of

the Father and at the throne of the King. Sin, therefore, is no light thing ; it is a thing of infinite concern. To be forgiven, much has to be forgiven.

V.

Our sin, moreover, stands not alone ; it is a part of the sin of the whole race.

God has been, and is here upon the earth, striving against the wickedness of the world, and seeking to set up His kingdom of grace and righteousness. He has spared nothing, not even the incarnation and death of His Son, to accomplish this His redemptive purpose. Men on the earth are, in their deepest life, either with or against God in His great strife for righteousness. If we withhold from God our trust, we take sides with the ungodliness of the world ; we take a place in and with the evil host who are fighting against God ; we are with them, hindering the march of God and the good to the establishment of righteousness and peace the world over. We therefore, by our ungodliness, join ourselves to, adopt and support, the sin of all sinners ; we stand with Judas and all traitors ; with Nero and all cruel rulers ; with the leaders of all vile interests and bad causes. We have, therefore, guilt with them ; we shall, if we repent not, be overwhelmed in the penal fires which will consume

them. Oh, verily, our sin is great ! We have much to be forgiven.

In view of this great sinfulness of ungodliness should we be surprised that in this parable we are said to be deeply in debt, that we have incurred a fearful liability to Divine punishment ? Jesus Christ, in a very sad spirit, spoke of the wrath to come, of weeping and gnashing of teeth, of outer darkness for the ungodly ; and is not this, His language, according to the truth of things ? He spoke of our sinfulness with a tone of infinite seriousness and pity ; He manifested for our salvation an intense solicitude ; He was ready to suffer for our salvation any cross ; and in all this was He not perfectly true, entirely warranted by the fact of the greatness of our sin ? Of a truth the sinful state is a very grave matter. The debt is very great. We have much to be forgiven.

Are we forgiven ? One evidence of our forgiveness is that we have some sense of the greatness of the forgiveness, and have some love to Him who has forgiven much. If we are not sure of our forgiveness, make sure of it at once. There is forgiveness with God that He may be feared. God Himself, in the gift and death of His dear Son, has made the path adown which He comes to you, offering free forgiveness. Go, meet Him in that path with penitence and faith. Great as thy sin is, to the vastness of the Divine mercy it is but as a pebble on the shore to the vastness of the ocean. Believe, and God

takes up thy sin, that pebble, and casts it into that ocean of His mercy. I know that forgiveness cannot undo the deeds that are done, they remain historical facts, but God can cease to hold you responsible for them. I know that even Divine forgiveness does not cancel the secondary consequences of sin, but God's forgiveness changes their character ; makes them chastisements, yielding righteousness. But what is the supreme penalty of sin ; the one thing the really penitent soul dreads ? It is this : separation from God—His wrath. To be God-forsaken—that is the hell, the condemnation. Here that is terrible ; but in the spirit world, where there are no carnal delights and worldly excitements to interest the abandoned soul, to be forsaken of God must be unspeakable loss and punishment. Now it is this supreme penalty of sin that the Divine penalty can and does completely cancel, entirely put away. To the penitent and believing soul God can and does draw nigh ; He comes to it ; He dwells with it ; He loves it ; He assures it of His love, breathes into it His peace, inspires it with His spirit, keeps it by His providence unto life eternal. " Her sins, which are many, are forgiven." " And He said unto the woman, thy faith hath saved thee ; go in peace."

THE GOOD SAMARITAN;
OR, GODLINESS DIVORCED FROM RELIGION

BY REV. W. J. TOWNSEND, D.D.

✓THE GOOD SAMARITAN;

OR, GODLINESS DIVORCED FROM RELIGION

“Which of these three, thinkest thou, proved neighbour unto him that fell among the robbers?”—LUKE x. 36.

THE lawyer who tempted Christ must be credited with a cavilling spirit. He was a trained expert in the letter of the law, but he knew little or nothing of the true spirit it enshrined. This is shown by the use of the word “tempted” in the narrative, as well as by the manner of the questioner. “Tempted” often means “tried” in the Scriptures, and if we give it that meaning here it shows that the man was eager rather to trip up Christ, or to catch Him in His words than to gather truth and wisdom. The question, “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” was an all-important one. Christ answered the man by another. He often adopted the Socratic form, and the man was professedly familiar with the law, its glosses and expositions. Fitly, therefore, he was referred to the law, “What readest thou?” The answer came readily, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul,

and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind ; and thy neighbour as thyself." No reply could have been more apt or more correct. "Thou hast answered right," said Jesus, "this do and thou shalt live." The lawyer had been drawn out by Jesus very skilfully. He had himself given the reply to his own questions, and given it in complete form, but he was not satisfied, his carping spirit would try again. The first part of his answer admitted of no evasion, no prevarication, no opening for criticism, but he had one chance of testing Christ left ; it lay in the word "neighbour." He made the attempt ; he would watch for an opportunity against Christ once more, and therefore said, "and who is my neighbour ?"

We have sometimes to be indebted to a captious spirit, however hateful it may be, for adding to our stock of wisdom. It was so here. We have to thank this man for the most telling exposition of practical religion the world ever received. Christ could give a brief, categorical reply to a question, and often did so, but on other occasions He unfolded the truth in the loveliest drapery of illustration that the human mind could receive. It was so now, and all succeeding ages have marvelled at the parable before us, so skilfully drawn, so pathetic in its incidents, so overwhelming in its application.

The incident probably took place at Bethany, the village of Martha and Mary. It was a mountain hamlet, which stood at the top of the long descent

from Jerusalem to Jericho, and which now suggested to Jesus the circumstances of the parable. It is a steep and sterile pass, running downwards for about four thousand feet. It is brightened by no luxuriant foliage, nor by either rill or well of refreshing water. The wild, cheerless valley of the Jordan lies below, diversified only by the lines of vegetation which mark the course of the river, while the defile itself is difficult to the feet of the traveller, and gloomy by the rugged rocks which stand in stern nakedness around. From the desert plain, and the fastnesses of the rocks, have come in all times bands of wild Arab highwaymen and marauders, who by their cruelty to travellers have made the road notorious in history as "the Bloody Way." It was, however, the connecting link between two important cities, both of them seats of commerce, government, and religion. Jerusalem was the capital of the nation, and the pride of the Jewish world. Jericho was the seat of the Herodian family, the country residence of the courses of priests not on duty at the temple, and a scene of such beautiful fertility as to be named "the city of palm-trees." So productive was its soil, and sheltered its position, that the people were able to cultivate rare fruits, and export them to neighbouring countries. Down this defile, towards Jericho, Jesus described a traveller as proceeding, when, as was but too usual, he "fell among robbers," the Arabian marauders, who to this day infest the route and make it needful for

travellers to have an armed escort with them, that with safety they may make the journey. Suddenly they fell upon him, almost in the twinkling of an eye they stripped him of clothes and baggage, cruelly beat him, and then left him "half dead," bleeding and helpless, with the burning rays of an Oriental sun glaring upon him. There he weltered, helpless and solitary, until, as Christ said, "by chance," another wayfarer came down the ascent. The wretched sufferer hears the approaching steps, and rousing himself from stupor, turns his eyes towards the traveller. Happy fortune! it is a priest of the temple! He has been up to Jerusalem, has fulfilled his course of sacrifice and intercession, and now is returning to his country residence to spend in prayer and pious meditation the intervening months ere he resumes his temple duties. The tortured derelict hopes well. Providence has smiled upon him in his distress and help is near. Alas! the priest draws near, looks upon him, gathers up his priestly garments in dismay or contempt, and passes by on the other side. It is bitter anguish to the wounded man, and his heart sickens with despair.

But hope revived. The thoroughfare was a frequented one, especially at certain seasons, and another traveller approached. Probably he came from the deep valley below, and the sufferer was once more revived by an anticipation of help in time of need. This time it was a Levite who drew near. He was on his way to holy duties in the

house of God. He was of a consecrated race, and was engaged in purely religious work, although less important in nature than the solemn duties of the priesthood. Surely he will have his feelings of compassion aroused by the woes of a sorely afflicted fellow-man. To the dishonour of human nature this man followed in the track of his ecclesiastical superior; he paused to look at the man lying in his blood, but the sight awakened no thrill of pity; he passed by on the other side, and hurried from the spot. It could not be otherwise than that the injured man resigned himself to death.

Yet another traveller drew near, but as the dying man strained his eyes to see him, no feeling of hope or gladness was aroused, for this man was a Samaritan. Hated by the Jews, and hating them in return, called by the Jews a dog, an outcast, and regarding them with bitter hatred and contempt, the tortured sufferer could expect no treatment from the newcomer but of the worst kind. If he speedily despatched him, he could expect no better. But human nature is not utterly lost to charity or compassion. The stranger rode to the spot, beheld the melancholy sight, and his heart was moved towards him. He sprang from his ~~b~~east, unfastened his wallet, dressed his wounds, "pouring in oil and wine," raised him with a woman's gentleness in his arms, set him on his ass, and led him to the caravansarai that breaks the line of the long

journey, gave him into the hands of the host with kindly admonitions as to the care to be taken of him, and then disbursed denarii to the spending amount of seven or eight shillings of our money, promised to return shortly, and further pay the host for his attention and hospitality.

This was the close of the exquisitely beautiful story Christ composed, and then He swept down on the cavilling lawyer in skilful manner by the question, "Which of these three, thinkest thou, proved neighbour unto him that fell among the robbers?" There was no possibility of evading the question, or of answering with sophistry, and the lawyer replied, "He that showed mercy on him." And Jesus clinched the practical moral, saying, "Go and do thou likewise."

Among many important lessons which are taught in the parable, only a few can be discriminated and emphasised here.

I.

We learn how godliness may be divorced from religion.

The word "religion" (*thrēskeia*) only occurs in two passages of the Bible, but the term "godliness" (*eusebeia*) occurs fifteen times, and its adjectival form three times. The former word generally refers to the outward forms and observances of a system of faith rather than to its inward and

practical spirit. It is used in relation to Buddhism or Mohammedanism, Popery or Protestantism, and is so used by Paul : "The straitest sect of our religion" (Acts xxvi. 5). The Jews of our Saviour's day had degenerated from the true spirit of religion into extreme formalism and ceremonialism ; they were exact and punctilious as to outward observances, and careless as to the law of love. In the picture drawn by Christ we have an exact portraiture of two religious men. The priest and Levite were dedicated to the service of the temple, and had important sacred duties to discharge, as the vocation of their lives. As such the ministry of love was the foundation of all real service for God. A priest was the representative of God to the people, and a representative of the people to God. He was the daysman who could lay his hand upon them both, a mediator of the covenant, and a supreme minister in holy things. The Levite, if he had duties less onerous and imposing, belonged to the same tribe, to the same consecrated order, and was supposed to have the same holy and devout spirit. The true priest is said, by the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, to be one "who can bear gently with the ignorant and erring, for that he himself also is compassed with infirmity." But these two men had no tenderness nor compassion. The religion they had was a mere husk, out of which all life and spirituality had faded. They offered the bread of life to the people, and sought to satisfy themselves

with the empty forms and formulas of a moribund system. They were perfunctory and not sympathetic, nor responsive to the Divine elements of Judaism which roused,

“Rapt Isaiah’s wild seraphic fire,
Or other holy seers that tuned the sacred lyre.”

They were types of men who fill the priest’s office for a bit of bread, who are urged by ambition or lust for power to sacrifice the spiritual for the ceremonial, and the substance for the symbol. Such religion ceases to be godly. It is of the earth, earthy, and tends to corruption. It is narrow in range, hard in texture, hungry as the grave for power, and without one vestige of tenderness for the lost and perishing. Such was the religion denounced with such severity by our Saviour, and such men as are here depicted are the greatest curse of a church, and the most fruitful producers of a repulsive scepticism. Nothing is more beautiful than religion filled with the purity and love of Jesus, but when it is destitute of these there is nothing more humiliating nor sad.

II.

Brotherhood overrides all distinctions of class
or creed.

Such an axiom should not need even to be named to Christians, it seems so self-evident, but to many

professed followers of Christ it is a strange sentiment. Time after time, as history shows, have Christian peoples been animated by the fiercest antipathy against other nations, and in sheer spirit of hatred have sought their extermination. Often have religious sects within the pale of Christianity carried out rancorous persecutions of their fellow-Christians, until the word of Christ has received ample illustration : "The hour cometh that whosoever killeth you shall think that he offereth service unto God" (John xvi. 2). But true religion makes no difference between classes, or creeds, or nations. Christ's manhood is universal in its relationship, and whatever is simply local or partial is abolished in Him ; all men are equally related to God, equally connected in Christ ; all have common needs, and all similar natures. All men are united in essentials, in interests, and in destiny. Therefore love for all, compassion for all, care for each other, should be felt and manifested by all towards all, and Christianity is understood and practised only as this sentiment prevails in the minds of its professed followers. If men differ from each other in opinion, they should still realise oneness of heart and nature ; if they are of different nationalities, they should remember that God "hath made of one, every nation of men for to dwell in all the face of the earth," that "lands intersected by a narrow frith" should not abhor each other, nor should "mountains interposed

make enemies of nations." It is truly Christly to rise above sectarian bitternesses, or local partialities, or tribal antipathies, and to realise practically the equality and oneness of the human race in Christ Jesus, leading us to unite in relief of common woes and needs, to sympathise with sorrow and suffering, and to share with others in poverty and misfortune.

The Samaritan probably was as rooted in his religious opinions as the priest and the Levite, but he had the spirit of true religion, however heretical he was in sentiment, and the word of the Master is: "Not every one that saith unto Me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of My Father which is in heaven."

III.

The parable teaches that true neighbourliness springs from love, and that sacrifice is the proof of love.

It is scarcely possible to believe that the ecclesiastics of the parable would act as they did without some compunction of feeling or qualms of conscience; they might try to silence the inward voice of duty which speaks to each man, by excuses of various kinds. The danger to them if they lingered in the way, the probability that

the man was past recovery in spite of all the help they could give, the peril which might overtake them if the darkness of night suddenly enveloped them, might all be used as palliatives to the accusing spirit which would protest against their inhumanity, but the absence of love prevailed to make them inconsiderate and cruel, steeled them against kindly influences which should have governed them, and led them to cast from them utterly both an urgent responsibility and a glorious privilege. The Samaritan, despised and hated by the priest and Levite, was the practical Christian after all; he had the spirit of love which fulfilled the law, and by sacrifice gave proof of the sincerity and depth of the grace which believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

Some time ago, dismayed and waterlogged on the boundless sea, a barque had drifted about, until it was one thousand miles from any land, and all hope of relief had died out from the minds of her starving crew. The cry, "A ship! a ship!" roused the dying energies of the men, and at once shawls and shirts on the ends of oars and boat-hooks were waved as signals of distress. The stranger vessel changed her course and bore down upon the miserable wreck. The wretched sufferers tried with united voice to send a cry of welcome over the waves, and when they recognised their country's flag they rejoiced at the sure pros-

pect of relief. We cannot realise what they felt as help drew near, after having for days anticipated an awful death, but still less can we imagine their awful revulsion of feeling, and the howl of despair which rent the air, when the vessel, sailing near enough to see the ghastly wretches in their destitute condition, stayed in its course, tacked about, and sailed away, leaving them to their fate. Nor was this all ; the same thing had been done by another vessel previously, which also bore their country's flag and colours. So they endured the tortures of Tantalus, and abandoned themselves to despair. When death had thinned their numbers, and all were laid helpless, suddenly, by God's pity, a Norwegian vessel sailed across their path. Compassion filled the hearts of the foreign sailors, and tender succour was afforded them. Nor was it until the last survivor had been carried on board the ship that they left the wreck to drift away, a derelict coffin, with its unburied dead.

But the picture presented by our Saviour in this parable is a finer representation of true neighbourliness. The Samaritans were of heathen blood ; they came of an accursed race ; rancorous hatred had existed between the races for many generations. But this man, called fitly for nearly twenty generations "the good Samaritan," had no shameful prejudice, bitterness, or class rancour. If he ever had entertained such inhuman feeling, it all vanished at the sight of urgent need, and he

not only poured out upon the sufferer the wealth of his benevolence, but did it with a gentle care that a tender woman could not have surpassed.

The injunction of our Saviour to the carping lawyer must have had its proper impression on his mind, and as we see around us the sinful and sorrowful, the lost and poor, let us receive with solemn obedience the same command, "Go ye and do likewise."

THE SELFISH NEIGHBOUR;

OR, INTERCESSORY PRAYER

By REV. ALBERT GOODRICH, D.D.

THE SELFISH NEIGHBOUR ;

OR, INTERCESSORY PRAYER

“And He said unto them, Which of you shall have a friend, and shall go unto him at midnight, and say unto him, Friend, lend me three loaves. For a friend of mine in his journey is come to me, and I have nothing to set before him? And he from within shall answer and say, Trouble me not; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give thee.”—LUKE xi. 5-13.

“I WAS out of a situation for a long while,” said a working man; “I prayed to God again and again to lead me to a situation. I tramped about week after week. I and my family suffered much, but no situation could I then get, so I gave up praying.” Jesus had met that working man—people who prayed, and getting, as they thought, no answer, became wearied out and gave up praying. The Jews had been praying for the advent of their Messiah, for deliverance from the Roman yoke which galled them sorely—“Avenge me of mine adversary;” or they had been praying for a higher spirit of endurance, a larger spirit of hope for the Holy Spirit; but neither the Messiah nor the Spirit seemed to be any nearer. They were growing

weary, somewhat sick at heart ; they were ready to leave off praying. To this class Jesus Christ spoke this parable of the Selfish Neighbour, and also the parable of the Unjust Judge.

The parable of the Unjust Judge has been treated as presenting persuasives to persistent prayer. This parable of the Selfish Neighbour we will take as furnishing the subject of intercessory prayer : first, its object ; secondly, its matter ; and, thirdly, its spirit.

I.

Its object.

The request was for a friend : “a friend of mine is come to me from a journey.” Who is our friend ? We would not confine the term to those we usually call such. Yet even in the more limited sense how often do we pray for our friends ? We cannot err in saying that the scholars of our class, the members of our congregation, the people residing about our church doors, are, in the broader sense, our friends. And can we hesitate indeed to include under the term “friend” our fellow-citizens, and especially of them the weak, the oppressed, the unfortunate, the miserable ? When our heart is touched by Christ’s Spirit what a feeling of friendliness, a sense of kinship, a tender yearning, fills it for all human souls—for those at home and abroad,

for the world, for humanity, not excepting those we may from other points of view regard as enemies. It is good for us when we awake to know that men are coming to us in the midnight of their darkness and want, when we hear deep below their carnal restings their cry for the bread which perisheth, when there comes upon us a burdened feeling of the world's great need of God and His Son Jesus Christ. That feeling coming, there comes also a sense of our own poverty : we have nothing to set before them. We can of ourselves do nothing. Then the refuge is prayer—intercessory prayer—strong and persistent, to our great Friend. “Friend, lend me three loaves.”

The object of the prayer was, then, for others, purely for others. “I have prayed long for the conversion of my husband,” said a poor woman, “but he is as far off conversion as ever.” “Why do you want your husband converted?” she was asked. “Oh!” she replied, “it would be so nice! how different the home would be!” “You forget,” was the rebuke, “the good of your husband and the glory of God; you appear to think of yourself. Pray for his conversion simply for the glory of God.” Intercession must have for its object not only another's good, but also purely that other's good, not our good through his good. If Churches pray for the conversion of souls that they themselves may have the joy and fame of prosperity, is it wonderful if their prayers are not answered?

The midnight guest, it seems, was not a friend of the selfish neighbour. He was apparently a perfect stranger. But suppose the friend asking for the loaves could have said to the selfish neighbour, "A friend of mine and of yours—Mr. So-and-so, you remember, who did you and me such good service—has suddenly come ; lend me three loaves for him, for I have nothing to set before him," think you the selfish neighbour would have been churlish ? But the people for whom we pray to God are as dear to Him as to us. He is their friend more than we are. He knows their need and feels for them better than we. Therefore, with what confidence should we pray Him for the loaves for these His hungry friends as well as ours.

II.

We note, next, of intercessory prayer, its matter.

The friend asked for bread—for three loaves, and only for the loan of them. A very reasonable request. He did not ask his friend to get up and go, kill and dress a kid for his midnight visitor. He did not ask him to come himself and assist to entertain him. Neither did he ask the loan of a few hundred shekels without security to help his friend on his further travels. Had he done so, certainly persistency would not have been commendable. Are not some of our requests to God

unreasonable ? Are they not sometimes for something other than bread ? That a certain day shall be fine, that we shall prosper in money matters, that our friends shall have the desires of their hearts—these and the like matters are something other than bread for the soul's hunger. We have no warrant to persist in prayer for them. And there are many things, as the removal of sickness, the deliverance from trouble, cups of sorrow, thorns in the flesh, which are quite legitimate matters of prayer, but which, beyond a certain degree, we are taught not to persist in prayer for. We may pray, like our Lord, three times that the cup may pass away, but ever with the word, "not My will, but Thine be done." But for bread, for the knowledge of truth and for the practice of righteousness among men, for conviction of sin, for yearning for salvation, for the spirit of faith—for these loaves of God's giving we are taught to pray till we receive ; we are to take no denial ; we are to give God to understand we will not let Him go till we receive them.

III.

The parable also shows that the spirit of intercessory prayer should be importunate.

To be, however, importunate it must be believing. The selfish neighbour had the three loaves asked for and more. Had he been able to say, "I have

no bread ; I am quite out of it ; I gave the last crust to the youngest child before we 'turned in,' " I do not see that the friend could have persisted. But churlish as the neighbour was, he was not a liar. He had the bread, and he did not say he had not. The friend, too, quite believed he had ; hence his persistence. And, brethren, there is no question that God has the loaves we want for the world. He has the gift of the Holy Spirit who supplies the reverence, the penitence, the faith, for the lack of which this world is dying. God can give them. God is not, like a mainspring shut up in a watch, a mere force inside His works, bound to work only in a certain way. God is the Father in heaven, reverencing His own law, but able to give us loaves, as was that selfish neighbour.

Though the selfish neighbour had the loaves, it was indeed a great inconvenience to him to give them. But to give us, say, the Holy Spirit, is no inconvenience to God. To give that Spirit He has to do nothing comparable to getting out of bed or to unbarring doors. God, as a living Person, can work miracles ; but to answer our prayers there is no need of miracles. The bread, the Holy Spirit, for ourselves and others, God can give us through the ordinary laws and channels of communication. Why, there appears to be evidence that, without the use of ordinary media, voice or letter, one mind can influence another very distant mind. A person's mind in England has directly influenced a person's

mind in Australia. The great trouble or joy has communicated itself without known media from the one to the other. How much more can the Divine Spirit influence as He will the minds of men? How much more does He know those mysterious powers of Spirit communication, of which we have but a very limited knowledge? Yes; God has got the loaves, and He can give them without any abnormal disturbance to His great household. Then with confidence let us persist in prayer.

Suppose this selfish neighbour had at some time said to his friend, "If ever you want anything do not hesitate to ask me; if it should be at midnight, ask me, knock me up if necessary; I am really anxious to be of use to you; it will give me sincere pleasure"—if he had ever said that, the friend would have had good ground to ask. But this and much more God has said to us. Promise upon promise, parable upon parable, has He given us assuring us He will answer our prayer. How, then, can we faint in prayer? With what boldness should we approach the throne of the heavenly grace!

And the friend's faith was so strong that in the face of some churlishness his temper was free from all anger; it was kindly, good-humoured. This selfish neighbour was not a bad-hearted, ill-natured person. Ordinarily he was quite ready to do a kindness. He was not a cold, proud, distant neighbour. Had he been, the friend would not have gone to him. He was not, however, perfect;

to be disturbed at night, to be wakened out of his first sleep, was a little too much for him. His friend called him "Friend," but he did not return the compliment. "Trouble me not," he abruptly answers; or the force is in our familiar language, "Don't bother me; don't fash me." When pressed he puts forth many objections—"I am in bed; the door is barred; the children cannot be disturbed."

But the friend was assured that beneath his grumpy manner and words there was a kind heart which would yield. He therefore did not get angry; he did not reply, "Well, call yourself a neighbour, a friend! You are an ill-mannered, disagreeable fellow. All right, my turn will come, and I shall remember this." On the contrary, the man kept his temper and pressed—"shamelessly pressed" as the word means—his petition. We all know the man who will not take "No" for an answer, the shameless beggar. Such was this man. He did not mind the trouble he gave. The door was barred, was it? Then his friend must unbar it. The little children, whom he had tucked up so nicely, and who were sweetly asleep, would be disturbed if he got up. Well, never mind, poor little dears, they must be disturbed. His friend wanted bread, and bread he should have. "Now," says Christ, "if your prayers are not answered, do not get angry or bitter or unbelieving; do not encourage hard or wrathful thoughts about God, but just go on praying; be cheerful, hopeful, that

your Father God, notwithstanding His apparent neglect, will hear and give. 'Because of his importunity he will arise and give him as many as he needeth.'"

We may encourage ourselves with the truth that there are good and sufficient reasons why God demands of us importunity. He thus at least tests the sincerity of our prayers. If we really do not want what we ask, we shall soon tire of asking. Do we in this state attain anything without perseverance? It is not by one wish or one effort that we get knowledge or art, truth or wisdom, manners or place. Importunity in prayer corresponds with, is a part of, the same order as that which requires perseverance in work. The faculty of using the gift is formed by perseverance in the seeking of it. Money too easily obtained, it is a common remark, has ruined many a young man. Grace too easily obtained would ruin many a self-indulgent soul. Importunity in prayer greatly exercises and strengthens the spiritual life. It compels us to realise God; it provokes us to think of Him and His ways; it makes us look into ourselves and stir up what grace we have. Then "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you."

THE RICH FOOL

BY REV. PRINCIPAL D. ROWLANDS, B.A.

THE RICH FOOL

“And He spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully,” &c.—LUKE xii. 16-21.

IT is a serious matter to call any man a fool. It ought never to be done except when circumstances make it imperative. Christ employs very strong language in reference to this in the Sermon on the Mount (though the original word there differs from the word used here) : “Whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council : but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.” But we must bear in mind that our Lord does not condemn the expression “Thou fool” in itself, but rather the spirit in which it is spoken. He does not affirm that it is wrong to say that a fool is a fool, even to his face, but that it is intensely wrong to do so from a feeling of hatred. God says to the rich man here, “Thou fool,” not because He hates him, but because it is a fact ; because He pities his miserable condition ; because He wishes to deter others from following his example.

It is hardly needful to state that there is no necessary connection between riches and folly. Every fool is not a rich man, nor is every rich man a fool, notwithstanding the insinuations which demagogues sometimes delight to put forth. It has been common for mobs made up of the dregs of society to applaud those unprincipled orators who endeavour to persuade them that the wealthy classes are so many idiots ; nay, such orators have in certain cases, by their specious arguments, moved the people to open rebellion against their rulers. But the progress of education, the spread of knowledge, and, above all, the diffusion of Christianity, place the masses in a position to judge for themselves, and enable them to detect the fallacies by which they were formerly deluded. We could offer no greater insult to the common sense of a moderately enlightened congregation than to tell them that riches and folly are inseparably connected ; for every man among them would speedily call to mind many rich men who rank with the wisest of the wise, and many fools who are among the poorest of the poor.

In speaking this parable, therefore, our Lord had not the slightest intention of reflecting on rich men as a class, but only on such of them as are covetous. He had just said, "Take heed, and beware of covetousness : for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth." What led Him to say this was the appeal made to Him by one of the company that

He should constrain his brother to divide the inheritance with him. Whether the man desired from his brother more than was due we are not informed ; but it is probable that he did not. Nor was it improper in itself that he should ask our Lord, whom he considered a just man, to act the part of an arbitrator between them. Still, our Lord answered him with words of reproof, "Man, who made Me a judge or a divider over you?" And why? Simply because He perceived that he was a covetous man, proof of which was that he troubled himself about the inheritance at a time when he ought to have attended to his spiritual interests. Hence our Lord said, "Beware of covetousness," and enforced His admonition by this striking and instructive parable.

Let me now direct your attention to two points.

I.

That this fool was in some respects a wise man.

Of this we have sufficient evidence before us. Consider—

1. *He was a rich man.*

"The ground of a certain *rich* man brought forth plentifully." The very fact of his being rich was in itself a strong proof of his prudence, for he must have either made his own fortune or inherited his fortune from others. Now, it is very often said that

anybody can make money ; that it requires no extraordinary powers to become rich ; that those who have prospered in the world are more indebted to adventitious circumstances than to any merits of their own. I am not so sure about that. It is true that men without intelligence, without education, without genius, are sometimes, through a favourable combination of circumstances, enabled to accumulate a vast amount of wealth. And it is equally true that men of intelligence, education, and genius are sometimes, through an unfortunate combination of circumstances, plunged into the depths of poverty. But granting all this, I think after all that riches, as a rule, are acquired by those who work hard ; who rise early and go to rest late ; who devote themselves with untiring energy to the serious business of life. Fortune is not the blind goddess she is sometimes represented to be, bestowing her favours at random, scattering her gifts indiscriminately, having no respect whatever to the merits of those who receive them. No ! the great law is that " the hand of the diligent maketh rich " ; success is a prize which can only be secured by those who diligently seek it.

But suppose this man had inherited his riches ? What then ? Why, even then he must have acted wisely, inasmuch as he did not waste his property through recklessness and extravagance. We know men who were born into the world the fortunate heirs of wealthy parents. They were never forced

to earn a penny for themselves, for abundance had been provided for them. But these men, thinking their resources to be inexhaustible, plunged headlong into all manner of excesses, and, as a natural consequence, found themselves at last in want, destitution, and misery. Such men are seldom pitied or respected, for they don't deserve it. Everybody knows that they gather the fruits of their own folly. But this man, though he may have been the son of a wealthy father, and thereby acquired a fortune which he never built, still had the good sense to live within his means, and to maintain the position in which he had been placed.

2. His land brought forth plentifully.

What did that prove ? Did it prove anything further than that the land was fertile ? I think it did. It proved that he was a skilful farmer, that he cultivated his land well, that he knew how to make the most of it. It is true that the abundance of the harvest depends on many circumstances over which man has no control, such as the refreshing dew, the genial rain, and the life-giving sunshine ; so that after man has done his best it is God who must give the increase. But we ought also to remember that God invariably observes the laws which He Himself has established ; He never causes corn to grow where seed has not been sown ; He never makes the uncultivated soil bring forth at the same rate as that which is properly tilled ; He never allows any man to reap abundantly who has thought proper to

sow sparingly. When land brings forth plentifully, therefore, it is a positive proof that it belongs to a skilful farmer. And I believe that, as knowledge of agriculture improves and advances, the earth will become increasingly productive. The resources of mother earth in this direction have not yet been properly developed, the limits of its fruit-bearing powers have not yet been fully reached ; but as the population of the globe increases, men will be compelled to bestow upon agricultural improvements more diligent care and attention.

And there is a lesson here for us all. Whatever may be your vocation, you have no ground to hope for success unless you conform to God's laws. It is quite right to trust in Providence, and to cast our cases entirely upon God, so long as we endeavour to perform our own duty. But if we are indolent and careless and thoughtless, we have no right to expect the smiles of Providence or the help of God.

3. *He was careful of his goods.*

"And he thought within himself, saying, "What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits ?" Now, there was nothing wrong in this thinking, and planning, and contriving ; nor was it, as some maintain, a sign of morbid restlessness of soul. It would have been an unpardonable negligence on his part to let the corn rot in the fields for want of sufficient room to store it in ; and it would have been hardly natural to expect him to distribute that for which he had no room among the poor.

Doubtless it is the duty of those who are very prosperous to be also very liberal : according as they receive from God so ought they to contribute to God's institutions ; but then we never think of their giving *all* they have to spare after supplying their own immediate wants. Men are perfectly justified in storing for the future what they have no need of in the present. "And he said, This will I do : I will pull down my barns, and build greater ; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods." So far well ; I don't know what he could have done better under the circumstances, and I cannot see that he did more or less than his clear duty. He is a fair specimen of a shrewd, thoughtful man of the world, who likes to make most of his advantages and opportunities.

Those who hoard wealth in an honest way have an unquestionable claim upon our respect. They are, as it were, the sinews of human society. This man was one of them. He did not acquire riches by defrauding his neighbours or by wild and hazardous speculations, but in the exercise of a legitimate and respectable calling. No class of men are better entitled to the rewards of their labour than the cultivators of the soil ; no class of men are more deservedly respected. Without pomp, or show, or the hope of renown, they continue steadily at their work, relying upon the faithfulness of Nature, or rather Nature's God, trusting that the seed they sow at seed-time will grow and

ripen by the harvest ; and thus they supply mankind with the best part of their sustenance. If some of them get rich, don't they deserve it ? Is there anybody so ill-natured as to begrudge them their prosperity ? But by whatever means men become rich, I repeat that they are the benefactors of their kind. Let them be ever so sordid and grasping, they are in spite of this doing a vast amount of good. Wealth is a mighty agent in the spread of civilisation, in consolidating empires, in maintaining law and order among men. Without wealth railways could not be constructed, ships could not be launched, towns and mansions could not be built ; in a word, most of the conveniences and luxuries of civilised life could not be secured. Barbarous nations are always poor ; and not only is their poverty the result of their barbarousness, but their barbarousness is to a great extent the result of their poverty ; and hence the misery and lawlessness from which they so grievously suffer.

But though this man was so careful of his goods, he did not deny himself the comforts which they were calculated to afford him. There was a degree of wisdom in this. I don't mean to say that there was perfect wisdom in this ; still, no one can deny that there was a *degree* of wisdom in it. I would much rather have the man who says to himself, "Take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry," than the man who half starves himself through fear of spending his money. I think every man ought to

live in a manner becoming his means and position. It is both foolish and sinful to deprive one's self of the things necessary to make life happy, when those things are placed by Divine Providence within our reach. There is something very expressive about the word "miser": no word could better describe the man to whom it applies; for if there is a truly miserable man in the world, surely it is he who suffers want in the midst of plenty, it is he who, though in possession of abundance of this world's goods, yet dares not lay his hands upon them.

So far, then, as we have examined the conduct of this rich man, it appears that there were many favourable traits in his character; there were many points about him which we would do well to imitate; there were many proofs that he was not lacking in the highest worldly wisdom. We are not, therefore, contemplating the character of an idiot or a madman, but of a man who stood well with all who knew him. But this only makes the remaining part of his conduct, which we have yet to consider, all the more deplorable.

This leads me to observe—

II.

That this rich man was a fool.

"But God said unto him, Thou fool"! Why was he addressed thus? Because—

1. *All his thoughts were concerning himself.*

“So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.” There is an air of self-complacency about the very expressions which he employs in speaking of his possessions. “My fruits, and my goods,” saith he ; as if they were absolutely his own, as if he owed them entirely to his own skill and industry, as if he had a right to apply them all to his own selfish ends. Truly God was not in all his thoughts ; for he never acknowledged Him for all His goodness. The very first thing he ought to have done, when he found that his lands were crowned with plenty, was to bow down before the heavenly throne, and say, “Thou Father of all the mercies which men enjoy, I thank Thee that Thou hast remembered Thine unworthy servant, and hast so bountifully prospered the labour of his hands.” But no ; he said not a word about God, or to God ; all he said was about himself and to himself : “*My fruits and my goods*” ! This man has many imitators still in the world ; men who practically deny the existence of Divine Providence ; men who seem to think that the world is governed by a set of unconscious laws, who feel themselves under no obligation to the Supreme Being for the manifold blessings of this life. But such men are labouring under a great mistake ; for God the creator is also God the sustainer ; He who in the beginning created all things still upholds all things by the word of His power. It is He who

clothes the lily, who feeds the ravens, who finds the young lions their prey. Not a sparrow falls to the ground without His notice, and even the hairs of our head are numbered by Him. His care extends to the minutest details of existence. So whenever we enjoy prosperity it is our first duty to acknowledge Him.

It is one prominent feature in man's greatness that he can enjoy the good things of this life and return thanks to the God who bestows them. In this respect he is infinitely superior to the beasts that perish. The beast eats, drinks, and grows fat, and never thinks by whom it is supplied, never troubles himself about the great Benefactor whose bounties it enjoys. But man can rise to the conception of the God who supports him, and render to Him sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving.

"So is he that layeth up treasures for *himself*." Selfishness is the basest of all sins. It is the most repulsive and degraded form of depravity. It deprives wickedness of its last shred of attractiveness. And to our shame it must be confessed that it is the peculiar fault of man. The whole constitution of Nature is a standing protest against it. No created object exists for its own sake or to serve its own ends ; but everything contributes its share to the well-being of the rest of creation. Think of the sun, the most glorious of visible objects, how from day to day, from year to year, he lavishes his light upon the earth with unbounded liberality, giving

life, and beauty, and freshness to the vegetable and animal kingdoms ; or think of the clouds, how with unwearied constancy they drink the waters of the ocean, not to retain them in their own bosoms, but to pour them down in plentiful showers, both on barren mountains and on fertile plains ; or think of the earth, how after supplying generation after generation with its fruits and metals, its soil is now as productive as ever, and its mines as inexhaustible. Everything, in fact, seems to teach the grand doctrine that "it is better to give than to receive." Can we think of these things and not blush at our own selfishness ? Can we meditate upon them and not despise our own conduct ?

"And is not rich toward God." Riches have their obligations. We have nothing in our possession but we are responsible for the use we make of it. Some one may say, "Have I not a right to do just what I like with my own ?" No, you have not. You have no permanent interest in anything you possess ; you are accountable to society, you are accountable to conscience, you are accountable to God, for the way you manage your belongings, and the day will come when, as a steward put in trust, you must render an account. Now, how can we be "rich toward God" ? By loving Him supremely. And how can we most effectually manifest our love to Him ? By supporting His cause in the world. The gospel is dependent upon us, the poor are dependent upon us, benevolent institutions are

dependent upon us ; these make up God's cause, and any favour or kindness done to these God regards as being done to Himself, and will reward it as such. Christ, in the graphic description which He Himself gives of the last judgment, distinctly declares that they who do their duty to the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, and the sick show kindness to Himself ; and that those who neglect to do their duty to these show unkindness to Himself. And when He shall come in His glory, and all His holy angels with Him, He will say to the former, "Verily, I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me" ; and to the latter, "Verily, I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to Me."

2. *He provided only for the flesh, the least important part of his nature.*

It is true that he talks about his soul, but only in such a way as to prove that he hardly distinguished his soul from his body, or, at least, that he thought he ought to have been well satisfied with the things which his body only enjoyed. "And I will say to my soul," said he, "Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years ; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry." But God said to him, "Thou fool" ! He talked like a madman, he seemed beside himself, and hence he deserved the severest rebuke. Ah ! how many there are still who confine their attention

so exclusively to their bodies that they utterly neglect their souls ; who, while they feed their bodies sumptuously every day, leave their souls to perish with hunger ! But the soul is the best part of the man ; nay, the soul *is* the man ; so that man can never be satisfied except with such things as satisfy the soul. Man cannot find blessedness in eating, drinking, and sensual pleasures ; for there is a longing within him after higher things. You may load man with all the honours that ambition can desire, you may surround him with all the luxuries that can be conceived of, you may give him the whole world for an inheritance ; but after all, if you give him nothing more, he will be miserably poor. And why ? Just because they are not adapted to appease the cravings of his soul. There is in man a yearning after the unseen, the spiritual, the eternal ; and he will never be at rest until he find it. Man needs God for his portion, and Christ for his Saviour ; so that until he believes the gospel true peace can never be his.

How many men there are in the world who act the part of fools, who are accounted wise in their generation and yet conduct themselves like madmen ! They strive to be at ease, they persuade themselves that they are happy, they imagine that they are secure ; but it is just because they are wilfully blind to their own condition. They say that they are “rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing,” and know not that they are

“wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.” May God preserve us from falling into a state like this !

3. *He provided only for time, the least important portion of his existence.*

True, he looked forward to “many years” of repose and enjoyment ; but what are many years to compare with the countless ages of eternity ? Even though he had been permitted to live the many years, which he so confidently promised himself, he could not have expected to escape death. But what had he provided against that solemn event ? Nothing, absolutely nothing ! He made ample provision for the few years of his earthly existence ; the *few* years, I say, for many years are in reality very few ; and yet for the great eternity before him he was utterly unprepared. Was not this taking care of the least important and neglecting the most important ? And was not this the conduct of a fool ?

It is quite proper for us to be careful of our bodies, to provide things suitable for our present condition ; indeed, it is our duty to do so. But let us not forget that we have souls—souls that will live for ever—souls that will only be beginning to live, so to speak, after millions of ages shall have passed away. Is it right, is it reasonable, is it wise, to neglect these ? Should we be compelled to sacrifice either the interest of the body or the interest of the soul, would it not be better to sacrifice the former ?

Should we be forced to choose between poverty here and poverty hereafter, would it not be better to be poor here ? It will matter very little in the end what our condition may have been in this world ; but it will be of the greatest moment that our affairs should be properly arranged for eternity.

Learn from this parable the terrible uncertainty of human affairs. Here was a man upon whom Providence had bestowed its richest favours. Having amassed an abundance of worldly goods, having surrounded himself with every possible comfort, he was intent upon spending the rest of his days in comparative ease. "Soul," said he, "thou hast much goods laid up for many years ; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry." But no sooner had he said the words than God proclaimed his awful doom. "Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee : then whose shall those things be which thou hast provided ?" What a dreadful fate ! What a terrible disappointment ! "Many years," said he ; but God said, "This night." "Take thine ease," said he ; but God said, "Thy soul shall be required of thee." By whom ? It is not stated. By demons ? We are not informed. Let us not attempt to unravel the dread mystery in which the Son of God has left the matter.

THE BARREN FIG-TREE

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THE BARREN FIG-TREE

“ He spake also this parable ; A certain man had a fig-tree planted in his vineyard,” &c.—LUKE xiii. 6-9.

WE are apt to fall into two mistakes with regard to the course of God's providence. On the one hand, when we see much evil in the world not only not visited with outbursts of Divine wrath, but actually succeeding and prospering, we come to the conclusion that justice is blind, or at least inexcusably tardy, moving with slow foot to the redress of wrong or the punishment of crime. On the other hand, when some startling calamity brings ruin and death to many human beings, and sorrow to many a home, we exclaim that Providence is capricious, launching its terrors against some, while others no less guilty pass unscathed—nay, oftentimes involving the innocent with the guilty in the same fiery storm. In the one case, whether they be among the scoffers of whom the apostle writes as “ saying, Where is the promise of His coming ? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation,” or among the martyred souls whose voice John

heard in his vision, crying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost Thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?" the finite minds of men sink helpless in the attempt to comprehend the vastness of the designs of eternity, and to trace the sequence and significance of events. In the other case we feel it hard to reconcile with the wisdom and love which our hearts ascribe to the object of our worship occurrences which seem as if the great patience had been goaded to extremity, and had burst out in indiscriminate and ungovernable rage. Each one of us has known times in which thoughts like these have seemed forced upon us. Observation alike of the history of nations and of the experience of individuals has given occasion to them. We have all known seasons when prosperity has made us presumptuous. So long as matters were going smoothly with us in the external world we have had little inclination to ask ourselves the condition of the inner life. Though conscious that all was not right there, it has seemed like a wanton disturbance of our peace to probe further. We have flattered ourselves, it may be, that nothing could be seriously wrong, as otherwise we surely could not be so happy and peaceful as we were. If Providence were willing to treat us kindly, why should we deal harshly with ourselves? But there have come seasons when our reasoning has been the reverse of this. The blow has fallen upon us, and

we are willing to blame anyone but ourselves. Because we do not feel more unworthy than at any other time we resent the suffering, as though we were the innocent recipients of an injury. We are ready to charge the prosperity we have enjoyed with being like the deceitful smile which lulls into a false security. We gaze with envy at the lot of others whom we deem more fortunate or more favoured than ourselves.

To such thoughts and questionings as these the parable which forms our text to-day, and the conversation which led up to it, offer a solution. Such thoughts and questionings, they in effect answer, are the consequence of narrowness and shallowness of view. To those who look more deeply into the truth, and take a more comprehensive glance, they are impossible. The moral design and meaning of events is their true explanation. It is because we are not looking from the centre that we see awry.

The Jews had very distinct though somewhat crude notions of the relation of Divine Providence to the events of life. The current theory was an extremely simple one, that prosperity and calamity were the direct consequences of conduct, and directly proportioned to its worthiness or guilt. Hence when exceptional misfortunes came upon anyone they inferred an unusual measure of transgression. When Jesus and His disciples found themselves in the presence of the man who was born blind, the question was asked, "Master, who

did sin, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" And those who told Jesus of the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices, evidently thought that so dreadful a calamity must be in retribution for offences of equal magnitude. But Jesus perceives and answers their unspoken thought, and in so doing sets forth the true relation of suffering to sin, exhibiting at the same time the lessons which the former ought to impress. "Suppose ye that these Galileans were sinners above all the Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay: but except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." He does not deny that suffering is largely due to sin, but He does deny that from special suffering is always to be inferred special sin.

Let us take a case. A regiment has mutinied, and the punishment of mutiny is death. History tells us of scenes, dark and horrible, where the band of insurgents gathered into a square was ploughed down by cannon and musketry until there was not a beating heart in that once living mass—a desperate expedient truly, but sometimes necessary, and by it nations have been saved. But sometimes, without extenuating the guilt of any, the more merciful expedient has been adopted of sentencing every tenth man only to execution, while the rest in his doom beheld and trembled at their own. So would Christ teach those whom He addresses—the special sufferings of some should impress upon

them the deep sinfulness of all. All have sinned, all must suffer. If some are called upon to endure while others escape, it is not that the sins of the former are excessive, but that the latter are vouchsafed a warning. Not that those were sinners above all the Galileans should be their conclusion, but that the same calamity might most justly have fallen upon them. Nay, it cannot even be inferred that because God delays to punish He has forgotten or has overlooked the offence. Over unrepented sin the doom still hangs, though it may be for a time deferred : "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." But the inhabitants of Jerusalem might say, "The Galileans are all half-Gentile, rough, uncivilised, sinful ; upon any of them destruction might with justice come ; but we, who live beneath the shadow of the temple, who frequent its courts and observe its ordinances, are guiltless, nay, holy in comparison with them. They too are turbulent and rebellious ; therefore have they brought upon themselves Pilate's vengeance, but we who live quiet and peaceable lives may well esteem ourselves safe from the Roman sword." But Jesus recalls to them another event, not less appalling, to which these reservations did not apply : "Those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem ?" These men were not Galileans, but inhabitants of the capital ; they were not creating any political dis-

turbance, but were passing by probably upon their lawful business ; they fell victims to no wrath of man, but at that moment the foundations, weakened by age or war, yielded, and the tower descended upon them as they walked unsuspectingly beneath. And the warning, like a solemn refrain, is added—“ Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.”

Why, then, does the vengeance thus assured still delay ? Why does the thunderbolt pause ere it is launched against the edifices of human sin and crime ? If in the misfortunes that befall individuals we are to read indications of the fate that threatens all, why, from its slowness to appear, may we not argue irresolution ? To these questions the parable returns an answer. It points us to the *patience and long-suffering of God*.

God can wait. His is no human patience or impatience, pressing things prematurely to an end. He gives time. His grace holds back the arm of justice. He wills not that sinners perish, but that all should turn and live. Yet His patience is not indifference ; His waiting comes at length to be ended. He is gracious, but He is also righteous ; His patience cannot make void the demands of His holiness. Behind His long-suffering there still abides His justice. He is not, cannot be, mocked ; He is loving and compassionate, but terribly in earnest. To those who will be won by His love, He is love ; to those who will walk in His light, He is light ; but to those on whom both love and light are lost, He will be a consuming fire.

The parable is a simple and natural picture of country life in the East. "A certain man had a fig-tree planted in his vineyard ; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig-tree, and find none : cut it down ; why cumbereth it the ground ? And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it ; and if it bear fruit, well : and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down."

In its primary application it was undoubtedly spoken of the Jewish people. It was of them Christ was thinking when they told Him of the slaughtered Galileans ; of them when He reminded them of the Judeans killed by the falling tower ; of them when He uttered the emphatic warning—"Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise"—literally, "in like manner"—"perish." And against the unrepentant nation came in the sequel, as we know, the sword of Vespasian and Titus, upon them fell the ruins of Jerusalem and of the temple, until there was not one stone left upon another. But the vision was not yet, though it was for an appointed time ; the day of merciful visitation was not yet over ; there was still opportunity for Jerusalem to know, and know savingly, the things that belonged unto her peace.

In the prophecies of Isaiah we have a remarkable parallel to this parable,¹ similarly uttered of

¹ Also to that of the Wicked Husbandmen, which see.

the Israelitish nation. "Now will I sing to my well-beloved a song of my beloved touching his vineyard. My well-beloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill : and he fenced it, and gathered out the stones thereof, and planted it with the choicest vine, and built a tower in the midst of it, and also made a wine-press therein : and he looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard. What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it ? wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes ?" It is a graphic picture of Israel's history. Saved by a mighty hand from the bondage of Egypt, the nation murmured against its Deliverer. Though He revealed Himself on Sinai, it turned away to idolatrous worship. When He brought it into the promised land and drove out the Canaanites before it, it forsook Jehovah its God, and kept ever falling back to the gods and the sins of the heathen. God gave them His law, but the Jews transgressed it. He made a covenant with them, and they broke it. He bestowed upon them the promise, and they despised it. He sent His prophets, and them they persecuted, stoned, and killed. And yet He bore with His people, and never ceased to exhort, to rebuke, to entreat, to beseech, and by the mouth of His prophets to pro-

claim, "Return, thou backsliding Israel; and I will not cause Mine anger to fall upon you; for I am merciful, and I will not keep anger for ever." At length in the fulness of time He sent His Son, and Him they crucified. What more could He do that He had not done? He gave the greatest gift which could be given to the world—He gave Himself in the person of His Son. Eternal salvation appeared in Him, eternal love setting itself to seek and save the lost; in His burning words the very heart of God spoke to the hearts of men. In vain—at least, as to the general result. Now the end was near. Jesus was for the last time in Jerusalem, and the shadow of the cross hung over Him. Some excitement there was on His account among the people, but it was like a fire of thorns that quickly blazes up and dies away. And strangely enough, as if to emphasise the solemn warning, and leave the Jewish nation without excuse, we read¹ how that occurred in act which He here speaks in parable. On the day after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem He was going early in the morning into the city, and on His way He passed a fig-tree with abundance of leaves upon it, but no fruit. It was in His eyes an emblem of Israel. All its strength was expended in the leaves, it had never come to fruit. And thus the judgment which the Lord spake concerning the tree was in truth a condemnation of the people. We know how the tree withered by even-

¹ Mark xi. 12-20.

ing was an emblem of the terrible fulfilment of that condemnation. Long had mercy interposed and held back from the rebellious nation the avenging arm. "Let it alone this year also ; . . . and if it bear fruit, well : if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down." But even hope could hope no longer. There among the ruins of Jerusalem the noble tree of Jewish nationality was felled and laid in the dust, till there might well arise from many a heart the lament of Jeremiah—"O that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people."

But the application is not to the Jews alone ; it is to all who think and act as they. In the history of the Jewish people a lesson for us is written, as for those whom Christ addressed it was written in the fate of the Galileans and of the men on whom the tower in Siloam fell. From the ruins of Jerusalem there rings out a voice to every nation on the earth—"Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." We too are the present objects of the Divine patience, and it depends on whether we use or abuse our day of grace whether or not we shall not be the objects of the Divine judgment.

"The peculiarity of the image," says an Eastern traveller, "that of a fig-tree in a vineyard, however unlike to the European notion of a mass of unbroken vine-clad hills, is natural in Palestine, where, whether in corn-fields or vineyards, fig-

trees, thorn-trees, apple-trees are allowed to grow freely wherever they can get soil to support them.”¹ But this was not a wild tree growing by the roadside, unwatched and uncared for, in which case there need have been little surprise at the absence or inferior quality of the fruit; but it was planted in a vineyard—either planted by design or expressly permitted to grow, in either case to the displacement of the vines and with the sole object of obtaining fruit from it. Care and husbandry had doubtless been bestowed upon it, and not without reason, therefore, did the owner of the vineyard come season after season seeking its return of fruit.

I do not attempt to assign a special meaning to every turn and feature of the parable. There is little profit, I believe, in such an endeavour. It too often withdraws the attention from the great principle which the parable is intended to illustrate, and so far, therefore, takes away from its force. Some, for example, would understand by the owner of the vineyard God the Father, and by the vinedresser who entreats delay His Son Jesus Christ; others, again, remembering that judgment is committed unto the Son, would see His image in the owner of the vineyard, and in the vinedresser the Holy Spirit who makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Again, there are interpreters who see in the “three years”

¹ Stanley, *Sinai and Palestine*, p. 421.

an allusion to the three years of our Lord's earthly ministry. We cannot, however, be wrong in fixing our thoughts upon the most *general* interpretation of the parable. We read, accordingly, in the words of the owner the expression of God's inflexible justice and righteous severity towards the sins of men, and in those of the dresser of his vineyard that of His patience and long-suffering mercy. The three years, at any rate, denote a *complete trial*; one year, and even two years, might pass without fruit appearing on a tree, but if three seasons had come and gone it was practically hopeless to expect it. "Cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?" It not only occupied the room which might have been filled by another and a fruitful tree, but it injured the soil, keeping other plants in its neighbourhood from the sun, and drawing to itself all the strength and nourishment of the ground. Why maintain an encumbrance like this? Failing to fulfil the purposes of its being, what claim can it have to forbearance? But the voice of heavenly mercy stays the judgment. Perhaps there is still a chance. Perhaps not absolutely all that can be done for it has been attempted. Not only that there may be no excuse, but that patience may not fail while a hope is left, let to the three years of ordinary probation be added one year more. Then will goodness set about its perfect work; no favourable condition of external circumstances shall be

wanting. If the plan thus pursued do not succeed, then the tree is hopelessly, incurably bad, and mercy will acquiesce in judgment.

"The axe is laid at the root." God does not cut men off unwarned; the sentence is announced before it is executed. "How often would I have gathered thy children together," cried Jesus over Jerusalem, "even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!" Before the flood men heard the testimony of Noah, the preacher of righteousness, and believed not; before the captivities prophet after prophet sought to turn back the wandering children of Israel and Judah to their father's God; before the destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersion of Israel the feet of God's own Son trod their streets, and the voices of His apostles sounded in their ears.

The danger in our day is no longer, indeed, to associate extraordinary calamities with special Divine judgments upon sins of unusual magnitude, but to dissociate all suffering from all reference to Divine Providence or to sin, to cease to regard it as educative or disciplinary at all. A few, perhaps, may commit the absurdity of seeing in an outbreak of cholera or cattle disease a visitation on account of certain heresies being published in our midst, but multitudes fall into the far graver error of seeing in it no call to repentance, because we can trace the outbreak of the epidemic or the occurrence of some grave catastrophe to its natural

causes, to the want of cleanliness or care. A railway train flies over an embankment, and the wail of sorrow is heard in many a home ; it is due to some defect in a carriage wheel, and the lesson of it is to be more careful in time to come. If this is all that it has to teach us, then are life and death made paltry and trivial things. There is an explosion in a coal mine, and of the eager workers who went forth, full of life and hope, some are suffocated, some are overwhelmed by the falling masses, some are left to starve, cut off from succour. An emigrant ship takes fire, and of the hundreds who were on board but two or three escape. Are such events merely to excite a morbid imagination ? Are men simply to turn aside for an instant from their work and pleasure to listen to the details of such catastrophes with speechless horror, and then, saddened, perhaps, for a time, but soon forgetful, to return to their ordinary occupations ?

This is not the Christian view of the world. Christ as little favoured the separation of suffering from sin as the connection of special suffering with special sin, especially in our judgment of others. The victims of such dread calamities may not have been sinners more than we, but not the less does their fate preach to us with no uncertain sound, "Be ye also ready." It is as though we heard the command of the great Lord of the vineyard, "Cut it down ; why cumbereth it the ground ?" Do our consciences testify that we are cumberers

and not fruitful,—by the course of our lives, by the examples that we set, marring, and not improving, the vineyard? What advantage will it be to us, in that case, that we are *in* the vineyard, members of the Church of God, recipients of all the gracious influences which He bestows and exercises? Does it not entail upon us the greater responsibility, and, if we prove unworthy, the greater condemnation? The late Pope, Leo XIII., in the poem dictated by him during his last illness, said—

“Bethink thee! who high place bears here below
Fiercer the doom shall fall upon his head!”¹

All the startling events which from time to time take place around us, all the troubles which meet us in our own lives and by own domestic hearths, may be, for what we can tell, the carrying out of the vinedresser's benevolent purpose, “Let it alone, this year also, till I shall dig about and dung it;” and if it all pass away without making any lasting impression upon us, what can we urge that the sentence should not at length be pronounced, even by the loving lips of Him who would fain have saved us? “And if it bear fruit, well; and if not, then—then, after that, thou shalt cut it down.”

Let us, then, seek peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ while yet we may. Let us resolve that each year as it comes shall find us striving

¹ Qui namque in populis excelso praestat honore,
Hei misero! poenas acrius inde luet.

in our heavenward course, growing in faith and love and nearness to God, that when He comes seeking fruit He may find it, and not cut down the tree, but transplant it, one day to bloom in Paradise, to be for ever among the "trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified."

"One trial more ! If then we bear no fruit,
O God of justice ! who shall longer stay
Thine arm ? Behold, the axe is at the root.
Oh, let repentance prune our faults away,
Thy Grace, O Lord, in plenteous showers descend,
And bid the rescued boughs with clustering honours
bend."

THE GREAT SUPPER

BY REV. GEORGE MILLIGAN, B.D.

THE GREAT SUPPER

"Then said He unto him, A certain man made a great supper, and bade many. And sent his servant at supper time, to say to them that were bidden, Come, for all things are now ready," etc.—LUKE xiv. 16-24.

THERE is one feature of our Lord's teaching which cannot fail to strike even the most careless reader of the Gospels, and that is, its extreme appropriateness. The topics on which Jesus addresses His readers invariably spring out of something in their actual condition and surroundings. There is nothing set or formal in what He says ; it is the free utterance of a heart in thorough sympathy with the condition and needs of His people, and earnestly desirous of their highest good. This spontaneous character of Christ's teaching is perhaps specially observable in His parables, and is very marked in the one now before us.

Jesus has been teaching in Peræa, and His ministry there, as at first in Galilee, has been attended with great success. Multitudes have been thronging to hear Him. The publicans and sinners are recognizing in Him their friend, and even the Phari-

sees, usually so cold and distant, are inviting Him to their houses.

It is at the house of a chief Pharisee that we find Jesus when the chapter in which this parable occurs opens. A great feast is going on, and Jesus is among the guests. What had been the Pharisee's motive in asking Him, we are not told. It may have been an honest desire to have a private opportunity of learning more of this new Teacher. It may have been merely an idle curiosity to see the Man whom the common people are receiving with such enthusiasm ; or it may have been an endeavour, and the first verse of the chapter seems, unfortunately, to confirm this view, to try and get hold of something in His conduct by means of which He may be discredited and condemned. But whatever His host's motive, Jesus attends the feast, and when there avails Himself of the opportunity, as He did of every opportunity, of furthering the work He came to do.

He has a word first of all for the other guests, as He marks the envy and vanity with which they seek the best places. Courteously and calmly, but with an authority they cannot gainsay, He shows them how foolish their conduct is, and then directly points to the consequences with which similar conduct in higher things will be attended, for, in God's sight, *"Every one that exalteth himself shall be humbled ; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted."*

From the guests Jesus turns to the host. Why is he giving such a feast? Is it from pride, or from a selfish desire to have the favour returned to himself? If he wishes to be hospitable let his hospitality be extended to those from whom he can expect nothing again, and he will be recompensed, not now nor here, but at the resurrection of the just.

But this talk is getting too serious for one of those present. There is a directness about it which he does not like. He wishes to change the subject, and he tries to do so by means of a pious remark which, while chiming in with what Jesus has just said, will yet prevent the subject from being returned to: "*Blessed*"—so he exclaims—"is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God."

The wish is in itself a perfectly proper one; the only fault that can be found with it is the spirit in which it is uttered. There is evidently—for this we may fairly infer from the manner in which Jesus replied—no depth or sincerity in the Pharisee's words. He is carelessly confident as to his own and his class's claims to a place at God's banquet, and so glibly the pious wish falls from his lips. He is very enthusiastic in words, while he indolently relegates the whole matter to the future, without one earnest thought of what is required now of those who would enjoy the full blessedness hereafter. It is this error which Christ meets in the parable which

follows. "You talk of blessedness," so He seems to say; "what good of all this talk if you are yourself indeed rejecting it? The point is, not what you have got to say about all the privileges of the heavenly feast, but whether you are availing yourself of the invitation that is being held out to you. Are you coming now?"

The parable, of which this is the root idea, is very simple. No one can misunderstand its significance.

"A certain man made a great supper, and bade many." At first they accepted the invitation; but when the day of the feast was come, and the host, in accordance with Eastern custom, had sent out his servant to remind them of their engagement, *"They all with one consent began to make excuse."* They were otherwise occupied; they really could not come; pray, let them be excused. And then the parable goes on to show how the host, passing over those who had thus disregarded his bounty, sent forth and called the poor and the maimed from within the city—the outcasts, that is, among the Jews themselves—and then, when these were not sufficient, those from *"the highways and hedges,"* the outlying Gentiles, that his house might be filled and the table furnished with guests.

The parable had a first reference to the Jews, and especially to the Pharisees. They were the favoured ones whom God first called. But they, while priding themselves on their outward privileges, too

often failed, alas ! to turn these privileges to any practical account. What then ? Would not their privileges be taken from them, and offered to those who would be glad of them, the confessedly sinful and needy, whom they so heartily despised ?

But the parable has also a universal reference ; it has a reference to ourselves. Is our religion, like the religion of the Pharisees, never apt to degenerate into a religion of mere pious utterance ? The invitation has been held out to us for so long. We are so well informed about the blessings which religion brings, that somehow or other we take for granted that these blessings are our own. The Pharisee took his stand upon the fact that he was a Pharisee, brought up under religious influences, careful and regular all his days in the performance of outward religious duties. And so, I ask, with ourselves, do professing Christians nowadays never lull themselves into a false security by the thought that from their earliest youth they have known the facts of the Christian religion, and been attentive in the performance of its rites ; never absent from their places in church on Sunday ; always ready to take their seats at the Communion Table. Ah, yes ! they say to themselves, never doubting for a moment that it will not be their own lot, "*Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God.*"

Surely, then, it is for us a matter of the most vital importance to see to it that our claim is a good one, and that when the real test comes we are not

found, like the men in the parable, beginning "*to make excuse.*"

"To make excuse"—mark! For the reasons brought forward by the different guests are strictly excuses. They do not, on being reminded a second time of the invitation they have already accepted, thrust it angrily or rudely from them. Their declinature is perfectly civil, couched even in apologetic terms, as if they are conscious of an act of discourtesy. "*I pray thee,*" say at any rate the first and the second, "*hold me as excused.*" But the declinature, while thus civil, is final. The guests are unconcerned about the feast. They have, in fact, so far forgotten it altogether that they have entangled themselves in other engagements which it will not be very convenient for them to break off. If, in fact, we wish in a single word to describe their attitude towards the feast, we may do so by the word "*indifference.*" The guests have no particular dislike to the host; they do not wish to disoblige him; but they do not care enough about him or his feast to put themselves to any trouble in the matter. It is necessary to keep this clearly before us, if we would understand the excuses rightly. They are not the excuses of men actively opposed to Christianity, but rather of men who count themselves among Christ's disciples, and yet who value their privileges so little that they neglect and despise present calls.

For notice their conduct more particularly. Here is the first: "*The first said unto him, I have bought*

a piece of ground, and I must needs go and see it."

This man has at least the decency to plead necessity for setting aside the invitation. But in what does the necessity consist?—the possession of a certain piece of property, which he is anxious to see. He has doubtless seen it before, but now that the field has become his own, he wishes to see it again—to plan the uses to which he may put it—and to rejoice in his growing prosperity. And all that, no doubt, would have been very right and proper, if it had not come in the way of a more important duty—the fulfilment of the engagement he had already formed. Do we not know the class whom that man represents?—those who are so taken up with their earthly possessions, houses, fields, riches, whatever they may be, that they lose sight of higher interests and claims. It is of such as these that Christ is thinking when He says : "*How hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God !*" (Mark x. 24). Not the mere having the riches, but the trusting in them, makes the hardness. Earthly possessions have taken the place which should be occupied by God.

Turn to the second excuse : "*And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them : I pray thee have me excused.*" The cares of this world—that is his excuse. He is a busy man, very much occupied with his farm, he cannot afford to let his worldly concerns run the least risk of suffering while he is away at the feast. It sounds

very plausible, does it not? Our worldly concerns, our business engagements, have a claim upon us; we have no right to neglect them, but we have to guard against their taking the first place in our thoughts, instead of the second. Christ's command was not, "*Seek ye first all other things,*" but, "*Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness, and all these things,*" as you require them, "*shall be added unto you*" (Matt. vi. 33). It is a command which in these days of ours we specially require. The struggle for existence is so hard; competition in all departments of life is so keen; there is such an eager hurrying and striving to be rich, that men do not find it easy not to be "*over anxious and troubled*" about the affairs of their daily life. "*I pray thee have me excused*" is their demand when the claims of religion are pressed upon them. "Wait until I have a little more time; until I can see my way a little more clearly before me; until I have made more suitable provision for my family"—and so waiting their chance is lost.

There is still a third excuse: "*And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.*" This time it is not the possessions or the duties of life which prove the hindrance but a new earthly relationship with all the pleasures that it involves. The man is so taken up with his domestic comfort and ease that he allows them to stand between him and the complete consecration to His service which God demands. For, as our Lord teaches in words fol-

lowing closely upon our parable, "*If any man come to Me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple*" (ver. 26). We cannot, indeed, for a moment suppose that Jesus meant these words to be understood literally. But they at least serve to bring out the close and searching nature of God's call, and the necessity of not allowing even the most sacred of human ties to interfere with our obedience to it.

These, then, are the excuses—the excuses, as I have already said, of indifference, but not, therefore, the less fatal in their results. Those who *despise* God's invitation are equally shut out from the feast with those who from the first hour have determined ~~not to go~~, and the privileges which they do not value while within their reach are taken from them, and given to others who are ready and willing to receive them.

And who these are our parable again suggests. They are "*the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind*"—the poor, who will get no other invitation ; the maimed, who are not likely to marry ; the halt, who will not go out to prove oxen ; and the blind who cannot go to see farms.¹ Or, to drop the symbolism, all who recognise their weak, and needy, and sinful condition, and who are hungering and thirsting after righteousness, that they may be filled.

¹ Bengel.

To all such the invitation is "*Come*"—nay, it is more than an invitation, it is a command, "*Compel them to come in.*" The servants are to take no excuse. They are to allow no shame, no deep-seated sense of unworthiness, no remembrance of past sins, to stand between these poor outcast ones and God's bounty. It is "just as they are" that He invites them; and only as they listen to His voice, and obey His call can His purpose of love be accomplished, and His table be furnished with guests.

THE LOST SHEEP

BY THE VERY REV. PRINCIPAL ALEXANDER
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THE LOST SHEEP

"Then drew near unto Him all the publicans and sinners for to hear Him," &c.—LUKE xv. 1-7.

A GREAT truth, like a great light, is blinding, and must first be viewed through a medium which obscures while it reveals, or in a reflecting surface which absorbs some of the brilliance while it gives back the form. Thus men look upon the sun's eclipse through telescopes with shaded glasses, and thus in the spiritual world truths, which of themselves are all but unintelligible, are made clear by example and by being placed in relation to principles which guide ordinary human life. The idea of gravitation, that mighty force which holds in their places systems of worlds, and regulates the majestic sweep of the comet through space, flashed upon the mind of Newton as he beheld an apple falling to the ground. The great reveals itself in the little, and the mind of man, comprehending most easily that which is within the range of its immediate observation, rises by means of this as by a stepping stone to the knowledge of the highest and greatest.

The parables of Jesus proceed on this principle. The bare statement of the truth which He desired to impress upon His hearers would in all probability have had no interest for them, even if they could at once have understood His meaning. But this they often failed to do, nay, in many cases they persistently *misunderstood* and *misrepresented* it. It stood too far above them to be at once discerned and appreciated. It stood opposed to those practical rules which from a lower standpoint they had framed for themselves, and which from such a standpoint were intelligible enough. The narrow mind reasons with correctness from its own assumptions; the mistake is that it neglects to inquire whether these assumptions are themselves correct. Hence, when it is brought within the influence of a larger mind it deems that untrue which is only a deeper truth. From such error it can only be delivered by a glimpse of that which it had hitherto left out of calculation.

Thus the first verse of this chapter describes what was at this time a general feature of our Lord's ministry. We are not to understand it as referring to any particular day or hour, but simply that Jesus received the publicans and sinners who came to hear Him, declaring by the act of doing so, that they were not beyond the pale of sympathy and salvation. But from the point of view of the Pharisees and Scribes this conduct was wholly wrong. They were incapable of occupying any

standpoint from which it could be justified. The publicans—those renegade Jews who had sold themselves to be the instruments of foreign oppression, who collected the taxes which were the token of the hated Roman yoke, and who used the little power they wielded for the basest of purposes, enriching themselves by extortion and injustice—and the sinners, the openly abandoned, those whose vices and crimes were notorious, who had broken with law and morality, religion and decency—these, in the view of the Pharisees, were irreclaimable, and to associate with them was not to elevate them but to degrade oneself. And from their point of view, the conclusion was not unjustifiable; for a Pharisee to have done what Christ did would probably have had the result anticipated. He might be no hypocrite, but one “touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.” Severe integrity, however, is more apt to be admired than imitated, and to insist upon the claims of the law would have had no effect with those by whom the law had been violated and defied. The Pharisee knew no spell by which to lure these lost sheep back into the fold, and if not himself corrupted by associating with them, he might render the path of transgression more easy to others by seeming to regard their sin lightly and not as a disease and a pollution. No marvel, therefore, that they murmured and said of Jesus, “This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them.”

Was there, then, no element which they had left out of calculation? Was there no danger of their having taken a half truth for the whole truth, and that the action of Jesus, opposed as it was to their ideas and prejudices, might be justified from a higher and more comprehensive standpoint? It is to this higher thought that Jesus would lead them, exhibiting it first as echoed and reflected in their own hearts and lives, and then bidding them argue as man can only argue from what is best and noblest in himself to what is true of God. Of the three parables in which He endeavours to do this, the first, that of the Lost Sheep, forms the subject of our present consideration.

I.

Let us first of all notice *the image which lies at the basis* of the parable.

It is founded upon the relation subsisting between a shepherd and his sheep. When we remember that the earliest records of the Hebrew race reveal to us their patriarchs, Abraham and his immediate descendants, as shepherd-kings, wandering from place to place, according as they found pasture for their extensive flocks and herds, and that several of the tribes never ceased to be pre-eminently pastoral, we perceive at once the special beauty and appro-

priateness of the image. It is, accordingly, one of the earliest of which God makes use to express His relation to His people. He is regarded by them as a King and as a Shepherd long before they ventured to employ the idea of a Father in interpreting the feelings with which they supposed Him to be animated towards them. "The Lord is my Shepherd," says the Psalmist, "I shall not want." "He shall feed His flock like a shepherd," says Isaiah, "He shall gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young." "Hear the word of the Lord, O ye nations," cries Jeremiah, "and declare it in the isles afar off, and say, He that scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him, as a shepherd doth his flock." The shepherd life of David was not forgotten among the glories of his reign, and the records of his youthful heroism in defence of his flock, stand side by side with those of a nation's deliverance by his hand. And when Christ came there was no more tender image under which He could depict His office and work, than as "the Good Shepherd that giveth His life for the sheep"—none more pathetic under which He viewed the ignorance and sin of those around Him than when He saw them wandering, "scattered abroad as sheep having no shepherd." In Eastern lands the figure doubtless has a deeper significance than in our own. There the shepherd and his flock lead a life in common, are exposed to the same dangers,

share the same privations, bear together the sun's burning heat, and the night's chilly dews; the shepherd leads his sheep from pasture to pasture, watches over their safety, provides against drought, finds them shelter from the storm, and rest from the weariness of the way, till his interest in them is no longer a purely commercial one, he knows them by head mark, and they know his voice and follow him, and if one of them strays, he risks life and limb to bring it back. It is to this strong, individual interest that Jesus appeals in the parable before us. "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost until he find it?"

II.

We observe, secondly, the *special circumstances* under which the tie which binds the shepherd to his flock is exemplified.

Out of the countless vicissitudes of shepherd life, the Lord selects this one—that of a sheep lost. It has strayed from the rest and wanders alone over hill and valley; now clambering over the rough stones; now passing through the thorny bushes; at one time in danger of falling from the precipitous cliff; at another of becoming the prey of the lion or prowling wolf. What more vivid picture of utter

helplessness could be drawn? The sheep has neither power of self-defence, nor the instinct which would guide it back to the safe pasturage. It wanders on, aimless and bewildered, forlorn and miserable. Unless help and rescue come to it from without, it is lost indeed. It may be that in comparing those publicans and sinners whom He sought to gain to the sheep which was lost, Jesus meant to remind the Scribes and Pharisees (to whom was committed the knowledge of God's law, and the responsibilities which such knowledge brought) that they had not done what they might to win back these strayed ones to the fold. To them might be addressed the words of the prophet Ezekiel, "The diseased have ye not strengthened, neither have ye healed that which was sick, neither have ye bound up that which was broken, neither have ye brought again that which was driven away, neither have ye sought that which was lost. . . . My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and upon every high hill ; yea, my flock was scattered upon all the face of the earth, and none did search or seek after them." That which they had not done He was doing, and as the first step to that better mind to which He sought to lead them, He endeavoured to awaken their compassion for the objects of His anxious care. What if through self-will these despised ones had broken away, had self-indulgence brought them the happiness they had desired? What if they were ignorant, and had been plunging wildly

and recklessly into vice through sheer despair of finding any source of truer joy, should not these signs of the length of their wanderings only secure for them the deeper pity? "All we like sheep," says the prophet, speaking in the name of all who are conscious of sinfulness, "are gone astray."

On the one hand, therefore, our Lord points us to the *wandering sheep*, and on the other to the *rescuing shepherd*. He is represented as a comparatively rich man, the owner of a hundred sheep. The loss of one from among so many would seem to be but of little consequence, especially when we consider the labour and risks almost certainly involved in its recovery. His conduct thus springs not from mere love of gain,—that would, perhaps, be best served by remaining with the ninety-nine and watching over them more carefully,—but from compassion arising from that individual interest which, as we have seen, the Eastern shepherd had in every member of his flock. He leaves the ninety-nine in the wilderness, by which we are to understand not an absolute desert, but those wide moorlands where human habitations were but rarely met with, and where the flocks might range in search of pasture. Some provision would doubtless be made for their safety; they might be placed, for instance, within the enclosure of prickly thorns, but the great security of the shepherd's presence was withdrawn from them while he went after the missing member of the flock. It was often, as we may easily conceive, a tedious

and toilsome search, but the brave heart of the shepherd never failed him ; he sought until he found—fit emblem of Christ's merciful and self-denying ministry. The Saviour's whole life, it has been said, was a following of the strayed. "He was not weary with the greatness of the way ; He shrank not when the thorns wounded His flesh and tore His feet ; He followed us into the deep of our misery ; He came under the uttermost of our malediction ; for He had gone forth to seek His own until He had found it."

The shepherd's compassion is thus evinced in his *perseverance* ; it is further manifested in his *treatment* of the strayed one when found. He does not chide or deal harshly with it ; he does not smite or drive it back ; he does not give it to a slave to carry ; but "layeth it on his own shoulders." The sheep is weary, and he does not add chastisement to its weariness ; he gives it rest. In this appears his fulness of sympathy. He understands all it has suffered ; he understands, too, the temptations, influenced by which it went astray. He has sought for it with anxiety and pain, when he finds it he deals with it pitifully and brings it back with joy. As his sorrow was deep, his rejoicing is great, and "when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me ; for I have found my sheep which was lost." In this is shown both the simplicity of his heart and the unselfishness of his previous anxiety.

Had he been actuated by the mere love of gain, by the mere desire to recover a lost property, he could scarcely have claimed or received so general a sympathy ; as it was, those who had shared his compassionate grief are fitly called to be sharers in his triumphant joy. He thought not of the pains and difficulties of the way when his search was crowned with success ; there was no hesitation or shrinking from the burden ; all that was toilsome was forgotten in the gladsomeness of his return.

III.

Let us now proceed to notice the *application* of the parable, and the special lesson which it contains.

The immediate application to those whom Christ addressed is not difficult. The parable, so clear in its main outlines and founded upon so familiar an illustration, may be thought to have scarcely needed an interpretation ; yet, to obviate all possibility of mistake, Christ gives it one, "I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance." The hundred sheep are obviously in the first instance the Jewish people. The sheep that strayed is that portion of them that neither made an attempt to keep the law nor a profession of doing so, which had repudiated

all control and made no pretence even to respectability. The ninety and nine were those who outwardly at least kept the law, and were restrained by it from all gross sin, who were morally upright and circumspect, walking according to the light which they had, and unaware of any serious charge which could be laid against them. It is evident that we must understand Christ to be using "just persons" and "repentance" as comparative terms—using them, that is, in the sense of those to whom He spoke.

There may, indeed, be in His words something of that gentle irony which He sometimes employed, as, when in replying to a similar charge to that from which He is here defending Himself, He said, "They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick; I came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." Here, however, He is adopting their own standpoint and arguing from their own experience. "Grant that you are all you should be, and that these are all you suppose them to be, what should be your conduct towards them? What should that conduct be which in Me should win your approval? Though you have a hundred sheep, if you lose one of them does not the merest self-interest impel you to search for it, and does God care less for what He has made? If beyond self-interest you be moved by genuine pity and compassion, can God look unmoved on misery which He can relieve? And here the matter

concerns not sheep merely but human souls, whose lost state is therefore the more miserable and calls for the greater love and helpfulness—those whom in your pride you pass by—to whom you say, ‘Touch me not, for I am holier than thou’—those God seeks, and there is joy in heaven over every sinner that repenteth.”

But this is not all. There is *more joy* over one sinner that repenteth than over ninety and nine just persons that need no repentance. How is this? Observe, Christ does not say there is no joy over the ninety and nine just persons. The upright and conscientious man is certainly better and more approved in the sight of God than the profligate and the abandoned. But his very integrity is often to him a spiritual danger, begetting pride and self-sufficiency, surrounding him with a hedge that must be thrown down, enclosing him in a shell that must be broken through, before his life can expand into the fulness of the Divine life. It is often necessary for such a man to stoop before he can rise, and humility is a hard lesson to him. The repentance of the open sinner, if it take place at all, is often more thorough, going down into the roots of his being. With him the Divine life *begins in self-abasement*. If the just person would open his heart to the genial influence of God’s spirit and teaching, his nature would be developed, and such steady development, surrounded as it would be by the supports of habit, and undisturbed by uncontrollable

passions, would be at once the strongest and most reliable Christian life. But far before the severe, frigid justice of the sincere Pharisee, is the warm heart and earnest, humble endeavour of the sinner who has learned to hope in God's mercy, to trust His grace, and to hate his sin because it is hateful to One who has loved him. Does not Christ intimate to these Pharisees what they need? "You may be just persons, and in a certain sense need no repentance, but you do need a change of heart, since your hearts are not in sympathy with God's, otherwise you would assist and not obstruct the good work which God has given Me to do. These publicans and sinners get nearer to God than you do, even as the ninety-nine sheep were left in the wilderness, while the sheep which had strayed was borne on the shepherd's shoulders to his home."

And let us notice, in conclusion, how Jesus identifies God's feelings towards men with His own, "I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven." Who is this that reveals the secrets of heaven, and claims to be in sympathy with the Most High? Who dares to say, "What I feel God feels; what offends you on earth, or in reference to earthly things, is felt as an injury in heaven?" Surely it is the voice of the Good Shepherd, who came to seek the lost. He speaks to us individually, for He bears to each of us an individual love. How long shall He stretch forth His hands to a rebellious people? Shall all His love, all His suffering, all His

faithfulness, be in vain, so far as we are concerned? Will we never hear, and hearing come to Him? When shall we be able to say, "We *were* as sheep going astray, but *are now* returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls"?

THE LOST PIECE OF SILVER

BY REV. GEORGE H. MORRISON, M.A.

THE LOST PIECE OF SILVER

“Either what woman having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, doth not light a candle, and sweep the house, and seek diligently till she find it? And when she hath found it, she calleth her friends and her neighbours together, saying, Rejoice with me; for I have found the piece which I had lost. Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth.”—LUKE xv. 8-10

THIS story carries us far away into an Eastern cottage. A woman has lost one silver piece out of her hoard, and she is engrossed in the eager search for it. The cottage is dark; there are no windows in it; there is only one entrance for the light—that is, the door. So she has lit a candle, and in the twilight darkness of her little home, she is peering and prying for her silver piece. At last, in a heap of dust, she spies the coin. There it is, glittering in the candle light: and, had it been a diamond that she found, her heart would not have given a greater throb. She was so happy—she must share her happiness. Her joy was far too big for that small cottage; so she cries on her female friends from up the street, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece which I had lost.” “And so,” says Jesus,

"among the angels of God"—and the angels of God are here and everywhere—"there is joy over one sinner that repenteth."

Such, then, is the simple story that Jesus told; and I doubt not the common people heard Him gladly. And it is into the inner meaning of that parable that I wish you to find your way. God grant us the light of a far brighter candle than was ever kindled in the woman's cottage.

I.

First, then, observe, *this coin would have seemed a trifle to the rich, but it was very precious to the seeker.*

If a rich man had lost that piece of silver, I do not think he would have worried about it so. The loss at any rate would have meant far less to him, and he would not have vexed his neighbours with it. It was a humble coin; its value, a few pence. "Why all this fuss," he would say, "about a trifle?" But it was no trifle, I warrant you, to the woman, when she counted her pieces, and found that one was gone. I think she had been saving for the rent. I think that these ten pieces were the rent. And I think that she has heaped them in a glass, and to-morrow she is going to pay the factor, when—what is this?—one of the ten is gone! And those who are not too busy to have noticed what toil and sacrifice it sometimes takes

for a single woman to save ten silver pieces, will feel her sorrow when she found her loss. Granted, it was a very humble coin. Granted, it was only one of ten. But oh, it was very precious to the seeker, and never seemed more precious than when lost.

Thus, brethren, our Redeemer teaches us the preciousness of every humble soul. If God in the mercies of Jesus is the seeker, the meanest life is full of worth to Him. It was not for some cheque, whose value ran to thousands, that the candle was lit and the whole house disturbed—it was all done for a little piece of silver. And when a man can say, “Christ died for me,” he begins to feel the parable is true. I have sometimes wondered what a savage would think if we brought him from Africa and showed him the Forth Bridge. He would hardly believe us when we said to him, “Friend, do you see these girders, how they rise? and these great piers that are rooted in the sea? all these were fashioned for that little train that moves like a child’s toy across the bridge.” He would hardly believe you if you told him that. But that stupendous structure was devised just for the carrying of that little train. And every cranny of this house was swept just for the finding of that little coin. And the magnificent plan of the Eternal God, built through the ages, and crowned in the cross of Jesus, was just for the saving of poor and humble souls. Try then to realise that you are very precious to the seeker.

However poor, however weak or worthless, you have a place within the love of God. It is the beginning of a nobler hope. It is the birth of dignity and power.

II.

Once more I want you carefully to note that
this coin was lost inside the house.

In the parable of the lost sheep it was not so. The sheep was lost out in the wilderness. It was far from the fold, with its protecting wall; it had strayed among the briers of the desert; wild beasts, and the dangers of a savage country—all these had to be dared by the good shepherd. The sheep was lost, but was not lost at home. And in the parable of the prodigal son it was not so. He, too, like the sheep, had wandered from the fold. He had taken his journey into a far country. He was a stranger in a strangers' land. You see, then, that it was different with the coin; and I do not think the difference is chance. There are such fine distinctions in the world, among the beasts and the flowers that are most alike, that I look for fine distinctions in the parables, since He who created the parables created nature. It is more than a chance, then, surely, that at this point, our parable should differ from the others. The piece of silver had not been lost outside. It had not been dropped by the woman in the street. It

was lying somewhere on the dusty floor. The piece of silver was lost within the house.

Are there no souls, my brethren, like that coin? Are there no lives lost within the home? The wandered sheep may tell us of the heathen, but the piece of silver speaks to us of ourselves. God has not set you in some savage country; you have been born and nurtured in a Christian land—that is the meaning of being lost at home, of being lost somewhere within the walls. It is to have been baptized to God in infancy, and reared by a pious and a reverent hearth; it is to have been a scholar at the Sunday school and an outward observer of religious duty; it is to have been long familiar with the Bible, and to have listened long to gospel preaching; yet still to be ignorant of heart-religion, and still to have the world at the life's centre, and still to be unacquainted with God. Oh, it is sad to be lost in the desert, but it is sadder to be lost at home! For he that knew not shall be beaten with few stripes; but to whom much is given, of him much shall be required.

III.

One cannot help thinking, too, that *the piece of silver would have been more easily found had there been less dust upon the cottage floor.*

I do not think it is to the woman's credit that to find the coin she had to sweep the house. The dust

that is thick enough to hide a piece of silver, does not, I take it, gather in a morning. Had she and her servants only been doing their duty, the coin would never have been so hard to find. But it was hard because the dust was there, and the dust would never have been there at all but for some daily lack of care and faithfulness. And, is it not just unfaithfulness within the church that makes it so hard to win a soul? We talk of the unsettling nature of the Higher Criticism, but I tell you that one inconsistent merchant will do more to unsettle the faith of a young man, than the reading of twenty volumes of the critics. When the dust gathers upon an elder's book, and his district begins to say we never see him; when the pew of a member, who enjoys excellent health, is always empty at the second service; when, in a word, the dust of cold formality, and of careless performance of most sacred duty, begins to settle on a congregation, then nothing but the sovereign grace of God will ever draw and win a sinner there. It is an increased faithfulness we need, if we are ever to experience revival. It is a fresh conception of our duty, and a new vow that we will do it well. God grant that the gathering dust of dead formality may never make it hard to win a soul!

IV.

But, again, I ask you earnestly to note : *this coin was lost to service.*

In each of the three parables of this chapter the word "lost" has got a different shade of meaning, and there can be little question that to the mind of Jesus these shades of meaning were all clearly present. In one point, it is true, they all agree. Nothing is lost hopelessly and finally. The sheep is found, and the piece of silver is found, and "This, my son, was lost and is found again." This loss, then, is not eternal loss; in that point all these parables agree. But mark the differences under that common feature. The sheep is lost through thoughtlessness and folly; it wanders on and never thinks of danger. The son is lost through stubborn self-will; he is bent on having his own way, and gets it. But in the parable of the piece of silver, this, surely, was the leading thought of Jesus, that the coin was lost to usefulness and service. What was that coin's chief end? It was to circulate from hand to hand. Why was it stamped with the image of the King? That it might be accepted, and be of some little service. And all that service had become impossible from the hour when it was lost within the house.

Now tell me, does not that throw a flood of light upon the meaning of the word "lost," for Jesus?

Apart from the larger question of eternity, which question is not present in the parable, can you not gather from the lost piece of silver what is the state of the lost soul to-day? The coin is still a coin, though in the dust, and the soul is still a soul, though it be lost; but it has ceased to fulfil the great end of its being, and for its destined service it is useless. In other words, a man is like this coin when he does not fulfil the objects of his being. He is like this coin when he is living in vain so far as life's higher purposes are concerned. He is like it when God's image on his soul is lost to the sight and service of mankind. That is the meaning that Jesus gives to "lost." That is the light that this piece of silver sheds. It hints at the waste of power, the forfeited service, the squandered opportunity, of the soul that is out of fellowship with God.

And, indeed, it is one of the true marks of sin that for all that is noblest it unfits a man. It drags him back when he is climbing heavenward. It would fain have him down, and couched among the beasts. It is sin that has laid its hand on our affections, and made them so often the ministers of ruin. It is sin that has wrested the powers of our intellect, till they are almost the enemies of God. It is sin that has made us love the darkness, when we are bidden come to the light and live. It is sin that drives us into self-chosen paths, and we will not believe that the end thereof is death. It is sin that makes it very hard to pray. It is sin that makes it

very hard to worship. It is sin that falls like a cloud on human love. It is sin that embitters and degrades the home. Till, through the ceaseless agency of sin, unchecked by the Spirit of a gracious God, to all that is heavenly a man is dead ; his life is useless, like this piece of silver. It is from that sad waste we are redeemed by Jesus. We are restored to currency by Christ. We are brought into living fellowship with God. We receive power, from a risen Lord, to overcome. And though we never fully triumph here, and are kept humble through manifold failure till the end, still, in the light and strength of Calvary, we dimly feel we are no longer lost, but have been found, for a little service, to God's glory, till the day break and the shadows flee away.

V.

Lastly, and in a word, let us observe : *there was common rejoicing when this coin was found.*

This woman found the coin herself, you notice. It was she who lost it and it was she who found it. She did not call in any tattling neighbour, who was gossiping and girding by the door. And, brethren, when the church is wide awake we shall find ourselves the coins that we lost, and we will not need such wandering evangelists as disgrace themselves by girding at the church. But the coin was found, that is the simple fact, and when it was

found there was a common joy. God grant that we be sharers in that joy ! For after all that is what we are here for—that is our crown as a Christian congregation. And if we never know that woman's gladness, let the town write "Ichabod" across our doors. We are not here, an honoured congregation, for any selfish purpose of our own. We were not redeemed by blood, and knit together to congratulate ourselves and be contented. We are here, the mystical body of the Lord, to show the Spirit of Christ until He come, and Christ Jesus came to seek and save the lost. Be earnest, brethren, the time is very short. Adorn your profession. Pray. Then under the simple preaching of the gospel, made quick and powerful by the Holy Ghost, may we not trust that never a Sabbath shall pass, but here, in the presence of the angels of God, there shall be joy over one sinner that repenteth.

THE PRODIGAL SON

THE PENITENTIAL WAY TO FORGIVENESS AND
SONSHIP

By REV. J. G. GREENHOUGH, M.A.

THE PRODIGAL SON

THE PENITENTIAL WAY TO FORGIVENESS AND SONSHIP

"Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son : make me as one of thy hired servants."—LUKE xv. 18, 19.

THE figure which impresses us in this loveliest of parables is the man going out to welcome home his self-despising son. The face on which we fasten, and which makes the charm and pathos of the story, is not the sin-stained, drooping face of the youth who has returned to his senses, but the kindly, tearful face of the old man who is so glad to have the boy in his arms again.

The prodigal is only one among ten thousand. His part of the story is told in every police court and every day's newspaper. His father is one of a million ; there are not many fathers even who can rise to such a height of generous and joyous self-forgetting as we have depicted here.

A lad from the north country strayed or stole into one of our great London cathedrals. He was

lonely, dejected, friendless, and ashamed. He had sown his wild oats and a good many other things—gambled, drunk, and fooled away money, health, and character. Disgraced, hungry, desperate, and broken-hearted, he crept in with the vast congregation to the sacred building. The preacher read the lesson for the day. It was this incomparable parable. He read it without comment, but with clear and impassioned elocution. The outcast drank it all in with ears and heart strained to intensity, and when it was finished, forgetting the place, people, and everything else, he cried out audibly, “Eh, but yon was a grand old man !” And the whole world of Bible-readers have said substantially the same thing when they came to this imperishable picture.

In that grand old man of the story, that human father, Jesus has given us the most attractive and most perfect image of God which came from His lips. That longing and looking for his lost one's return ; the going out to meet him ; the kiss of welcome and the fond embrace ; the prompt, frank, and complete forgiveness ; the utter silence and forgetfulness concerning the evil and shameful past as if it had never been ; the festal robes and the rejoicing feast ; the infinite tenderness, delicacy, and sweetness of it all, make up an appealing and affecting portrait which chains our admiration, stirs our deepest hearts, and goes beyond all thought. We feel that there is something

far more than human in this. It is the beauty of God, it is the unspeakable grace of the Divine Fatherhood, and it is the great, pitiful, forgiving heart of God which the story brings to view and which stands for ever prominent in our thoughts of it. We call it "the parable of the prodigal son," but it is more truly the parable of the Eternal Father, with His wonderfully kind heart, with the love that changes never, and the sweep of forgiveness which is boundless in its breadth and depth. But now our text reminds us of another side. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee." The forgiveness seems to be unconditional. It seems to wait for nothing. It does not even wait until the confession is finished. It cuts short with sweet abruptness the humbling cry. It is poured out in lavish abundance, and given swiftly, as a flash of light. Yes ! but there is something behind, and if you pass by that you miss the whole purport of the story. Jesus leads up to the grand climax of fatherly love by a staircase of humbling, bleeding sorrow and an agony of repentance : "Father, I have sinned." There has been that long-continued, painful cry from the depths before there comes the answer from the heights of gentleness and grace. Jesus paints a background of terrible remorse, soul-sickness and sin-sickness, and utter weariness and disgust with itself, days and weeks of bodily hunger and heart-hunger, with aches and wounds which nothing can heal, and

an awful shame in which every bit of pride and self-conceit writhes itself out of existence ; a loathing of the past and a fierce thirst and longing for home and the father's presence and a new life, and the willingness to take the lowest place of service in the house where he was once son and heir. He comes home bleeding at every pore with the self-inflicted stripes of a torturing repentance ; and then he is met with the kiss and welcome and the flood of sweet forgiveness which bathes him in its rest. The father knows that this suffering has been gone through. No need to have it told in words ; it is visible in the anxious, pleading face. The fact that the lad has come home is proof enough of it. He who went out so gaily, flaunting his pride and defiance in the face of the world, would not have returned in that lowly, suppliant attitude if pain had not killed his haughtiness, and remorse quenched his gaiety, and the whips of hunger, want, and self-contempt lashed the folly out of him. There was first the fierce-burning, volcanic repentance, the groaning of a soul that had passed through its hell, and then the heaven of a father's love, and the boon of a grand forgiveness. " Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son."

And that is the lesson which we have to learn—that the most beautiful and the most magnanimous act of forgiveness recorded in the sacred

story follows upon the most genuine and complete confession and repentance, and would not have been given without that. Before the door is thrown open and the fatted calf is killed there must be this cry of the broken heart, "Father, I have sinned." There is no outstretched hand of pardoning mercy until the sinner stoops in lowly shame and suffering to touch it; there is no real forgiveness possible except through the dark and prickly gateway of self-abasement and tearful repentance. You mistake the whole thing if you fancy that God's grace, or even human grace, can cover and blot out sins for which there has been no penitence and no loathing; you speak sometimes as if the Christian spirit required us to forgive whether the sin is confessed or unconfessed, whether the wrong done is repented of or deliberately continued. I declare without hesitation that is not the Christian spirit. It is utterly foreign to the Christian spirit. The Christian spirit is a union of justice and mercy. It is prompt to forgive; it never keeps forgiveness back one moment beyond the hour in which the wrong-doer makes sorrowful acknowledgment and puts on real garments of shame and humility; but forgiveness which anticipates that hour is only levity, sentimentalism, and an abuse of charity. You have no right to forgive a man's base and dishonest conduct until he has seen and felt and groaned under the guilt and wickedness of it himself. You have no right to pardon your

child some deliberate sin until your child has come to you and knelt before God with tears of contrition in the eyes. Such forgiveness is immoral. It is not God-like ; it is the soft indulgence which makes light of sin, which smiles when it ought to condemn, and encourages the sinner to sin again. "If thy brother trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again, saying unto thee, I repent, thou shalt forgive him." Precisely ! if he repent ; seventy times a day if he repent with unfeigned lips, but not once a day, or even at all, if there be no repentance. So said the Lord Jesus, and He carried it out in His own gracious ministry. The forgiveness of Jesus was the grandest exhibition of unlimited grace and tenderness which the world has ever seen. He forgave to the uttermost. He forgave the worst—the harlot burdened with her lifelong shame ; the adulteress fresh from her iniquity ; the publican with the black stain of dishonest dealing on his conscience ; the cowardly disciple whose treacherous denial had just been uttered ; the blasphemous thief who had reviled Him on His very cross—He forgave them all freely and fully without a moment's pause, but they had all groaned out in sobs or silent agony their cry, "I have sinned." He never said one word of forgiveness to the men who repented not—to the sleek hypocrite, the self-righteous Pharisee, to the extortioner and unjust who clung to their iniquity, to the hardened heart which felt no relentings, to the proud eyes which were never

lowered in [shame or touched with tears. For them there was no mercy even from the Lord of mercy, no drop of compassion even from Him who was the fountain of pity.

And that is the forgiveness of God !—unlimited in its extent and depth, wider than the sea, deeper than hell, lasting as eternity, repeated for ever and for ever as often as it is honestly asked for, but never given once until this heart-felt cry arises, “Father, I have sinned.” We only cheat ourselves if we think there is pardon for the sins we have not felt and loathed, pardon for the sins that have brought no shame and no moments of agony. You may join in a thousand general confessions, and talk with jaunty gaiety and easy conscience about the unlimited mercy of God—it is all in vain. It is only the sound of a tinkling cymbal ; it is the iteration of a mockery and delusion unless the heart has had its hour of shame and grief and the conscience its burden of sad, distressing memories. There is no forgiveness if you love your sin and hold on to it. There is no forgiveness until you tread your sin down and spit upon it. There is no forgiveness even at the Cross for the guilt that has never felt its guilt. He who made that great eternal sacrifice for sin made no sacrifice for the sin which remains unconfessed and unrepented of. There is no fountain open for the cleansing of guilt that brings no remorse ; of guilt that knows no sorrow ; of guilt that strives for no

amendment. The Cross is the mercy-seat of the penitent, and not the hiding-place and cover of the careless and unwounded and unrelenting heart. "Without shedding of blood there is no remission of sin"—not only the blood of the great vicarious Sufferer, but a few drops of our own blood, sharp pangs of misery and shame, hours of humiliation, lashings of a stern self-condemnation, and repentance even unto tears. That is ever the way of forgiveness, and there is no other. The Father's kiss is never on your lips until your heart has been wrung to its depths with this prodigal's cry: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee."

And what is more, you will never realise your Divine sonship until you have felt, as this returning sinner did, that you are utterly unworthy to be called His son, until you feel that the place of a hired servant in His house is quite too good for you. Men talk to-day with wonderful glibness about the fatherhood of God as if they had a perfect right to it, as if it were the most natural thing in the world to claim and enjoy it, and they talk about it without the slightest sense of their unfitness to call themselves His children. One can only say that such talk means nothing. The fatherhood of God is nothing more than a commonplace of speech, a superficial trick of thought borrowed from the popular and floating sentimentalism of the day, to those who speak of it in that flippant and easiful

fashion. They do not know what it is—this fatherhood of God. They only think of it as a soft and good-natured and grandmotherly benevolence which is equally kind and forgiving towards all. They do not understand the depth and height and grand justice and infinite sweetness and wonderful condescension of it all. They touch its outer garments and never lay their hands upon its great, sweet, throbbing heart.

No, it is only known and enjoyed by those who have felt how little they have deserved it. I a child of God! How can I dare to raise my eyes to a dignity so sublime? I who have fed so often among the husks, and consorted with the swine! I who have sojourned so often in a world of coarse, low thoughts! I who have been so forgetful of the higher things, and so contented with the vulgar and vain! I who have been such a fool, and scouted God's wisdom! I who have many a time sold some birthright for a mess of pottage, and well-nigh forfeited the heavenly crown to be pleased with a rattle and tickled with a straw! I who have been so fickle in purpose, so soon weary of every good thing, so easily tempted and seduced, so prone to sin, so hard to pull towards God, so blindly forgetful and thankless of His grace! I a son or daughter of the Almighty! with a right to kneel at His feet and call Him Father! with a sure place in His changeless love, and a full share in His unwearying forgiveness! cared for by Him, borne with and

never forgotten ! How can it be ? The wonder of it overpowers our thought. We cannot think of it rightly except upon our knees ; we cannot think of it rightly save with thoughts too deep for tears.

“The mystery of so bright a bliss my feeble heart o’erbears,
And unbelief almost perverts the promise into tears” ;

and it is only when we feel something like that that the fatherhood of God lays hold of us, and inspires a passion of gratitude, and fills us with amazing joy. We never realise the privilege of our sonship until we have uttered this cry of painful self-depreciation : “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son : make me as one of thy hired servants.” Then His kiss falls upon our lips ; then is the ring of complete forgiveness put upon our fingers ; then we enter into the festal gladness of His perfect love, and then we know that we are sons and heirs in His house for ever, joint heirs with Christ of glory and eternal life.

THE PRODIGAL'S ELDER
BROTHER

By FRANK BALLARD, M.A., B.D., B.Sc., &c.

THE PRODIGAL'S ELDER BROTHER

LUKE XV. 11-32

THROUGHOUT the Christian world for generations past this matchless story has been known as the parable of "The Prodigal Son." It is too precious and too familiar to call for eulogy. So many sermons and homilies have been based upon it, both in print and by word of mouth, that it would seem alike impossible and unnecessary to add any further exposition. One well-known writer has recently summed up the general estimate in the avowal that "it is the perfect expression of the Divine benignity, the final revelation of the Fatherhood of God, and it has become to all Christian thinkers through all generations the master-light of all their seeing." With all such appreciation we need find no fault. So far as it goes it is true and worthy. Yet there is left room to ask, Does it go far enough? It may be the truth, but is it the whole truth? Is not the customary title, after all, defective, seeing that it applies wholly and only to the first half of the

story? And is not the usual appreciation also somewhat at fault, in that it fixes its gaze upon and expounds one side of the picture only? Is justice done to the work of any artist when we survey only a portion of it? Or can true appreciation of the discourse of any teacher consist in virtually ignoring half of his lesson? This, however, is what almost always happens in regard to the parable before us. Some, indeed, have gone so far as to believe, if not assert, that the latter half might be well omitted altogether. But surely the fact that it is not omitted is sufficient guarantee, for all who revere the great Teacher, that in it also, as really as in the first half, there is both meaning and purpose.

The usual procedure appears to be to read into the story an occult reference to the behaviour of certain scribes and Pharisees, and then hold up the elder brother to scorn as the incarnation of churlish selfishness. A leading religious journal has thus put it quite recently: "The practical lesson from the sequel to this parable is a warning against the deadly sin of jealousy. Often the saddest family feuds have their root in a revolt against some real or imagined unfairness in the household"—which is perfectly true, in general; but is there in the story before us any suggestion whatever of such jealousy on the part of the elder brother? I think not. It may be lawful in exposition to read between the lines, but that which is read should at least be parallel to what is actually written. So, again,

when the same commentator continues : " Yet the elder brother's was a churlish, mean, grudging spirit—such as sometimes spoils the most virtuous moral character. This distempered, ungenerous heart forgot that he was angry at his own flesh and blood." All this is quite in accord with the general sentiment, but I submit that there is in the parable itself no real ground whatever for such an indictment. So it comes to pass that great part of the significance of the whole story is lost. Nor is such partiality of interpretation by any means harmless. Of a truth there is real possibility that " The Prodigal Son " may be over-preached, for what one hears sometimes almost amounts to the doctrine so emphatically disowned by the apostle, " let us do evil that good may come." From some expositions the only inference would appear to be that sin does not matter so much, if only repentance follow. Whilst in other directions, fervid oratory would drive home the conclusion that the nearest way to the father's heart was through selfish wilfulness, and that the sure road to the father's home was *viâ* the " far country," with its pigs and harlots. How far such suggestions are from the mind of Christ no words are needed to show.

We will here, therefore, assume all that is true and tender in the first half of the parable, merely pointing out in passing, that the close of the twelfth verse is quite sufficient to give pause to any hasty identification of the father in this story with " the

God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," for it is absolutely certain that "our Father," to whom Jesus teaches us to pray, will never so reply to the passionate demand of a wayward son. The father who did so, in our human midst, would only prove himself as foolish as his child was selfish. Still, in considering the general signification of the narrative, no one will deny that the treatment accorded to this poor wanderer—who illustrates in himself so vividly the folly and the penalty of sin—is full of comfort and of inspiration. As such, its message is always needed and always blessed in a world like ours.

Whilst, however, we would detract nothing from the tender helpfulness of the first half, it is rather to the deep significance of the latter portion of the story that we will now direct our attention, considering more especially the case of the elder brother.

Let us first endeavour to do justice to the story itself, and then mark what present-day lessons emerge.

Under the former head three important aspects of the case call for fair estimation—(1) The character of the elder son ; (2) his treatment by the father ; (3) his life prospect as compared with that of the returned and welcomed prodigal.

I.

The character of the elder son.

The customary condemnation of the elder brother as a churl, is based at the outset upon verse 28. "He was angry and would not go in." But the hasty unfairness of such a judgment is manifest as soon as we begin to think, for, keeping the circumstances of the picture before our mind's eye, is any character truly or fairly estimated from that which happens under strong pressure at a moment of surprise? All that is really warranted here, by way of inference, is that this young man was of an impulsive temperament and was strongly moved, being thus goaded to speech by an unexpected conjuncture. Upon which we may remark, first, that it ought not to be reckoned to any one's discredit that he is of a quick, warm, sensitive disposition. After all our premiums upon caution, it is the men of impulse who move the world, as it was undoubtedly the most impulsive of the Apostles—Peter, John, James, and Paul—to whom Christianity owed most at the beginning, and is still most indebted in the New Testament. Of what the cooler spirits did we know nothing.

Let us look, however, a little more closely into this narrative. Where was the elder brother when the younger one slunk home? We are told that

he "was in the field." What does that mean? In an agricultural district it can only signify that he was where he ought to be, viz., at the post of duty.¹ Is then duty, or honest fidelity to work, such a trifle as to deserve no notice at all? Would it not be well for this land of ours to-day if every eldest son were at any test-moment to be found faithful to duty, and every "working man" actually doing something that deserved to be called work? At all events the apostolic benediction is unmistakably pronounced upon "those who by patient continuance in well-doing" merit recognition. A gospel which ignored the dignity of duty would be poor "good tidings" to humanity.

Another careful glance shows how the surprise came in and the indignation arose. Verse 25 makes plain that, according to the picture, some time elapsed after the prodigal's return before the feast commenced, during which no notice whatever was taken of the principal worker in the field. One would have thought that after the fatherly embrace, the very first thing to be done would be to send a message to the elder son at his toil. Apparently no notice was taken of him at all. He

¹ "Now his elder son was out on the farm"—so rightly renders Dr. Weymouth, in his *New Testament in Modern Speech*, which ought to be in the hands of every English-speaking Christian who does not read the original. It is as much more truthfully expressive, in numberless cases, than the Revised Version, as the Revised Version is more accurate than the version of 1611.

was left to find his way home when he might, and then learn casually what had transpired. Hence the shock of surprise, and, not unnaturally, the feeling that he had been slighted, whilst the wastrel lad was being fêted as a hero. It seems, indeed, a small matter to be slighted, but to sensitive minds there are few things more painful, and in church life there have probably been more offences caused in this way than in all others put together. Let those who have never taken offence from such a cause be the first to cast stones at this dutiful and diligent young man when, like the Apostle Paul afterwards, he was surprised into indignation.

But this is by no means the whole case. Consider fairly the first half of verse 29. Looking his father in the face this son can say, "Lo, these many years do I serve thee, and I never transgressed a commandment of thine." Is such filial service a fit object for scorn? In how many modern Christian homes is the eldest son thus all he ought to be—his father's right hand, his mother's comfort, the mainstay of the home, the noble example to all the rest? Verily it were well for this England of ours to-day, if all the eldest sons were of such a calibre!

Again, is not indignation sometimes well warranted? Do we not read concerning Jesus Himself that "Grieved and indignant at the hardening of their heart, He looked round on

them with anger?"¹ Was it not the Apostle Paul who definitely bade the Ephesians "be angry," when there is just cause? Nay, if indignation be always necessarily churlish, what becomes of the truth that "God is a righteous Judge; yea, a God that hath indignation every day"?² Surely the real question is whether there is in each particular case righteous cause for anger. And what of that before us? If we take the picture as we find it, can there be any hesitation? How could the incarnate selfishness of the young libertine, who had flung down his work to follow his lusts, fail to come back vividly into recollection? Was it such a trifle as not to be remembered, when the whole property of the reckless young spendthrift was suddenly withdrawn from the estate? Business men in these days are wonderfully keen as to such matters. Truly, if the elder son had followed the example of the younger, there would not have been much of a feast for either of them to come home to. Have we not heard and seen more than enough of the lazy one of the family, the would-be "gentleman," whose linen must be immaculate, whose food must be cooked to perfection whenever he calls for it, whose ringed finger can hold the cigarette so gracefully, the "masher" who seldom if ever does an honest day's work, but is content to live upon what he can catch, only grumbling that it is

¹ Mark iii. 5. Dr. Weymouth, *New Testament in Modern Speech*.

² Psa. vii. 11, R.V.

not more? If the vision of such does not cause indignation, then we are far removed alike from the moral standard of the Psalmist, "O ye that love the Lord, hate evil," and from that of the Apostle, "Regard with horror what is evil, cling to what is right."¹

Even the strength of indignation is accentuated sometimes by tender thoughts, for these young men had not only a father but a mother, and as there was "music and dancing," it is not reading too much into the picture to assume that there were also sisters. What, then, of these? If the elder son had not shrunk with practical horror from the behaviour of the younger, would not they also have been exposed to risk of suffering, and want, and homelessness? At all events, in cases without number, that is what actually does follow. All this, and more, may well have surged into the mind of the tired worker who came home to find that the scapegrace was being luxuriously feasted and treated as a lost treasure.

There is, moreover, no little force in his expostulation of verses 29 and 30: "Thou hast never given me a kid that I might make merry with my friends." It is too often so, that the father who has a favourite—and generally younger—son whom he spoils, is less than just to the one who serves him best. But the failure to appreciate the goodness of those who are nearest to us, is ever the mark of a defect in

¹ Psa. xcvi. 10; Rom. xii. 9.—Dr. Weymouth.

character, and in these days, when "clubs" of all sorts are increasingly the fashionable rendezvous, the modern father might do worse than take a hint from this plea of the elder son, and do something towards making a feast at home, all the brighter and nobler for the presence of those who have never been prodigals.

Here, therefore, we have two visions of character, substantiated in modern fact times without number. On the one hand, years of home routine, with purity, patience, unselfish duty, tireless service, chivalrous devotion, all not seldom underrated. On the other hand, precocity, impatience, scorn at home "tameness," passionate demand for the liberty that means license, the longing to "shake a loose leg" and sow not a few "wild oats." Then, after a while, the inevitable consequence, the glutting to nausea of the lower nature, the unexpected but pitiless disillusion, the bitter remorse, the crawling back crestfallen to live upon those who had formerly been scorned. How comes it to pass that the contrast involved is so often ignored in the name of religion? Well, indeed, it is, that we should lay stress upon fatherly compassion towards a repentant prodigal, but it is still more needful to point out with all emphasis, that faithfulness to duty is better than sinning and repenting, and that patient goodness at home is measurelessly nobler than rushing away to folly and slinking back to forgiveness.

II.

The father's treatment of the elder son.

It seems highly necessary to make clear the inwardness of the phrase "his father came out and entreated him." Not seldom this is interpreted as meaning "rated him soundly," but there is no ground whatever for such a suggestion. The very same Greek word occurs in the next chapter of this gospel, where Abraham is represented as saying to Dives, concerning Lazarus, "now he is comforted." Such a rendering, moreover, is true to its general significance throughout the New Testament. To soothe the elder brother, therefore, and plead for the younger—that is what the father came out to do. The righteous indignation was all on the other side, and we are quite warranted in regarding the father's silence in reply as acknowledging it. The more we think, indeed, of the father's words, as here represented, the more they convey to us a very different conception of this elder son's character from that so often popularly asserted. Unfortunately our English rendering is so stiff as to effectually conceal the tenderness of their appeal. But Dr. Weymouth is perfectly warranted in his translation—"As for you, dear boy, said the father, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." Yet how many of the

myriad familiar hearers and readers of this have ever done it justice? Fairly regarded, such terms cannot but assume nobility of nature, as shown in the appreciation and reciprocation of that best and highest part which the youngest son had flung away with scorn, like Esau selling his birthright for a single meal. "Always with me"—why, here is the very heart of love's purest enjoying upon earth. What did Tennyson mean when he wrote—

"Their meetings made December June,
Their every parting was to die,"

save that which we all feel, unless our hearts have been made callous with selfishness or sin, viz., that life's tenderest joy is to be "with" our loved ones? Such "with"-ness would be as meaningless to a genuine churl as poetry to a dog. The tenderness of the father's appeal would be as utterly lost upon a "distempered and ungenerous heart" as a sonata of Beethoven played to the east wind.

Nor is that all, for the reminder "all that is mine is yours," carries no less significance. How, indeed, came he to need it? There are plenty of eldest sons who do not. Even in Christendom to-day there are not a few adolescent monsters quite unashamed to express their wish that the "old man" were gone, so as to give them full possession of what they have long enough anticipated as their own. But this elder son evidently belonged to a higher species. He was not serving with one

eye upon half-scamped work, and the other upon the "main chance" to come. O noble simplicity! Blessed need of reminding, where human nature, as a rule, is all too keen!

At the conclusion of this interview popular theology assumes, on the elder brother's part, an envious scowl and a permanent hate; but, assuredly, these are not reached by prolonging the lines of the narrative as they appear before us, rather they would suggest the "coming to himself" of the elder brother in a nobler sense than the younger could know. A softened face, a moistened eye, an outstretched hand, a heart of pity for the wanderer returned—these are the natural complement to what we have seen to be true of him thus far. Nor is there any reason at all why we should suppose the contrary.

III.

The aftermath.

But it would be a great mistake to close our study here. We are only at the beginning of some of its most impressive lessons. It is of the highest importance that a comparison should be instituted between these two in the sequel to the vivid scenes here portrayed, for the common

notion still is that the prodigal's was not only the nobler nature, but that he had the best of it in the end. Such a thought, however, is not only superficial and unwarranted, but utterly misleading and mischievous. It becomes fearfully easy to create the impression that it was rather a good thing than otherwise to have been a libertine. Whence it would follow, that to have been lazy and selfish, first a prodigal and then a penitent, on the whole brought greater blessing than to stand firm by holy duty and incur no need of forgiveness. But even a brief glance at what must needs ensue, after such a crisis as is here represented, utterly dispels such a delusion.

Look first at the returned profligate. We will not grudge him the welcome and the feast, for he had had little enough of either through many a weary month. But even feasts over prodigals returned cannot last for ever. What, then, when the merry-making was over? Well, at least, some such realities as these. When he began again to work, as perforce he must, every landmark in the old familiar fields, every building, every hillock in the ground he knew so well, would cry "shame" upon him as he passed. The very tenderness of the welcome he had received, and the ungrudging freeness of his forgiving, would pierce him through and through with remorse, for it is ever the memory of the sin against love that stings most. Ever and anon there could not but roll down upon

him, with crushing force, the reminder that the years he had spent in folly were lost—lost, beyond recall, for ever. But he knew too well, also, that they had left him a double heritage of ill. Evil habits of soul, and broken strength of body, these certainly, in greater or less degree, are the libertine's reward. To a fearful extent the tragedy yet perpetuates itself around us day by day. "God is not mocked." Out of our sight, and beyond our ken, men do, *now as ever*, reap in anguish the harvest of wild oats they sow in recklessness.

But we pass out of darkness into light when we think of the faithful brother. Of course, after such a crisis, there would have to be a readjustment of family affairs, but he would go forth to his work with a new and exhilarating sense of his father's loving confidence. The thought that he was after all the heir to the estate, would crown his sense of duty with pathetic anticipation of the loss which must precede such gain, together with the consciousness of responsibility which ever inspires, not depresses, a noble soul. No evil habits of desire embarrass his mind, his body is hardy through faithful service, and rather braced by use for the luxury of work than clogged by infirmity or enfeebled by shattered nerves. And if we assume only that which his character warrants as here displayed, viz., his full-hearted echo of the father's forgiveness of the younger brother, then there is added to his other blessings the self-enriching

blessedness. The comfort, the inspiration, the compassion, that fill the heart of the faithful one, when love and pity triumph over righteous indignation, become a veritable miniature of the joy of the great Elder Brother, whose "meat and drink" it was "to do the Father's will," but who gave Himself a ransom for His brethren.

By antithesis, all the more solemn is the reminder that, for those who have wilfully flung away their birthright and grovelled in the slough of their evil desires, no repentance, no pity, no forgiveness, not anything in heaven or earth, can give them, when they become penitents, a perpetual feast. However warm the welcome, however tender the kiss, there will have to be faced the shame, the memory, the remorse, the force of evil habit, the enfeebled will, the daily fight for an uncertain future made harder by an irrevocable past. Thus emerges the final and awe-inspiring truth that whilst it is good indeed to be converted, it is for us and for our children far better to need no conversion. Blessed as in very deed it may be to become a forgiven prodigal, it is now and henceforth measurelessly more blessed to be a faithful son, to whom the father's love can continually say "This is my beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

THE UNJUST STEWARD.

BY REV. GEORGE MILLIGAN, B.D.

THE UNJUST STEWARD.

"There was a certain rich man, which had a steward ; and the same was accused unto him that he was wasting his goods. And he called him, and said unto him, What is this that I hear of thee? render the account of thy stewardship ; for thou canst be no longer steward," etc.—LUKE xvi. 1-13 R.V.

THE Parable of the Unjust Steward is one which is apt at first sight to cause us no little difficulty. We seem to have an unjust man held up for our commendation and as an example to ourselves, and the lesson drawn from his conduct, "*Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness,*" is, as we commonly understand it, the very opposite of what we should expect to fall from the lips of our Lord. Some of these difficulties are increased, if not caused, by slight mistranslations in our Authorized Version ; but, before we notice these, it may be well to draw attention to what is a distinguishing feature of all teaching by figures or parables, namely, that they are intended to present us with one or more prominent truths which we are to lay hold of, disregarding all minor details as only the setting or surrounding of these truths. Our aim, therefore, must always be, in the first instance, to get at what

these main truths are, and then we shall be in a better position to determine what parts of the parable are rendered necessary by the moral, and what parts not by the moral but by the parabolic mode in which the moral is conveyed. Or, to put this in other words, our Lord, to teach a lesson, tells a story. Only certain parts of the story bear upon the lesson ; the other parts are necessary only to make it a suitable story to convey the lesson. It is by forgetting this, and trying to draw a lesson from each particular of certain parables that we so often land ourselves in hopeless confusion.

Thus, though our Lord on one occasion, to teach the necessity of persistent prayer, relates the parable of the widow who at length gained the attention of the unjust judge by her continual pleading, we are not to infer that, because our prayers are addressed to God, He is an unjust judge. Nor, in the case of the parable before us, disregarding the lessons which our Lord Himself draws, are we to fix upon the injustice of the steward and the frauds that he practised, and imagine that we are encouraged to be cunning and crafty, and not to mind defrauding others, if we can only advance our own ends.

But, it may still be urged, is not that after all the main drift of the whole parable ? And at first sight, as I have already admitted, it looks very like it. But if you will consult the Revised Version, you will find one or two little changes of translation which

help to put the true meaning in a different and clearer light. Thus in verse 8, instead of reading "*And the lord commended the unjust steward,*" where we usually think of the Lord Jesus Christ, we find that we should read, "*And his lord*"—the earthly lord and master, that is, of the steward—"commended" him—and commended him, mark, not for his injustice, but "*because he had done wisely*"—because on a critical occasion he had shown both prudence and foresight, and had made skilful use of his present opportunities in order to further his future welfare. And so when, in the following words, we come to our Lord's own comment upon the incident, it is still the same feature of the steward's conduct that He impresses upon us, for His advice is not "*Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness,*" as if we were actually to make the mammon of unrighteousness our friend; but, "*Make to yourselves friends by means of the mammon of unrighteousness*"—so employ the mammon, the wealth, the power, which so many employ amiss, that it can only be described as unrighteous—so employ it, wisely and prudently, that "*when it shall fail,*" and your opportunities in this life are over, you shall be welcomed "*into the eternal tabernacles.*"

Keeping, then, this before us as the great lesson of the parable—a diligent use of present opportunities that in the end we may give in a good account—let us now turn to the story in its various details, and see how well adapted it is to enforce it.

"There was a certain rich man, which had a steward." This steward was the bailiff or factor whose duty it was to look after the estate, to see that the rents were duly paid, and that his master's interests were properly attended to. These duties he had neglected. With perhaps no deliberate intention of defrauding his master, he had yet been careless, extravagant, wasting money which did not belong to him to meet his own luxurious way of living. Reports of this from various quarters at length reached his master's ears, and he summoned his faithless servant before him. *"What is this that I hear of thee?"* he asked. *"Render the account of thy stewardship; for thou canst be no longer steward."*

The blow had fallen unexpectedly, and for the moment the steward was at a loss. Clever man as he was, he had never been placed in such a strait before, and he saw no chance of eluding his lord's detection. The only course open to him was to make some provision for the time when his office would be finally taken from him. But what could he do? He had not the physical strength to dig: to beg he was ashamed. Suddenly a bright thought struck him. Why not use the little interval of power that still remained to him in making friends of those who would stand by him hereafter? And so summoning before him his lord's debtors he began to adjust their accounts in such a way as to earn their gratitude. *"How much owest thou unto my lord?"* *"A hundred measures of oil."* *"Take thy bond, and*

make it fifty." "And how much owest thou?" "A hundred measures of wheat." "Take thy bond, and write fourscore."

It may appear that such a course of action could not escape detection, and that the steward was only preparing further disgrace for himself, but when we remember that the rents in the East were paid in kind, and that it fell to the steward to fix the value of the crop, and the proper proportion of it that was due to the proprietor by the actual cultivators, it is probable that these abatements represented simply the renouncing of the overcharges he had hitherto made and appropriated to himself. On this particular occasion, therefore, the steward may be said to have acted honestly, inasmuch as he "charged to the debtors the correct amount, while he doubtless represented the diminution as due to his kindly influence with his lord."¹

But in any case, and I again repeat it was this alone that won his lord's approval, and provided the lesson our Lord would have us to learn, the steward proved himself a man of energy and resource. He spared no pains and avoided no precautions in order that he might provide for his future interests, and in so doing showed himself one of those true sons of the world who, in Christ's words, are so much wiser for their own generation than the sons of the light.

It is a truth of which we are continually receiving fresh illustration.

¹ Dean Farrar.

Take the man of business. Whatever the business transaction on which he is engaged—the purchase of some house, the lease of some farm—how ready he is to put his whole heart into it. He consults those who are best able to advise him. He realizes that, if he is to act successfully, he must act at once. He shows himself prepared to face a certain amount of self-denial, and even hardship, in the present, if only he is persuaded that in the long run it will repay him. Or take the devotee of pleasure, the man whose one aim is to extract as much pleasure out of life as possible. It is a common remark what trouble people will put themselves to to secure some new gratification. Having made pleasure their god, they think no time wasted, no expense too great, in its eager pursuit. “If we are to enjoy ourselves, let us enjoy ourselves thoroughly,” is their motto. Again, they are wise for their own generation.

But how different it often is with the sons of light! How apt they are to be careless, half-hearted, even with regard to those eternal interests which they admit to be of supreme importance! They imagine, or at any rate they act as if they imagine, that when once they have made an open profession of faith in Christ, and are regular in the performance of certain outward religious duties, such as reading their Bibles, or saying their prayers, or attending church, that then they have done all that is required of them. And so far, no doubt, well. But no one, to watch either them or their conduct, would ever

imagine that their religion was costing them any serious effort, or that they had any real anxiety about what awaited them hereafter. They want thoroughness. They require to imitate in the service of God the "*wisdom*" which is so often displayed in the service of the world.

And this "*wisdom*," it may be further remarked, is to be shown in the "*little*" things of our daily lives, as well as in the great. "*He that is faithful*," says our Lord in words immediately following on our parable, "*in a very little is faithful also in much : and he that is unrighteous in a very little is unrighteous also in much*" (ver. 10). The case apparently suggested is that of a father or owner who educates his son for managing the estate to which he is heir by allowing him to have control over some small part of it. And the way in which he discharges that trust is taken as proving his fitness, or unfitness, for his future position. Even so, says Jesus, it is by our faithfulness in the small things of life, by the manner in which we are seizing upon the opportunities which each passing day brings with it, that we are preparing ourselves for future usefulness, and building up the characters with which we shall one day have to stand before God.

And the warning is the more needed because, as we know well, it is just because they are small that we are so apt to let these daily opportunities slip past unrecognized. The very fact that they have been offered to us so often blinds us to their real

significance. And we are so much the slaves of custom and habit, that we neglect our chances to-day, because we have neglected them a thousand times in the past.

It is said that a man had once a strange and startling dream. He seemed to be standing in the midst of an assembly of evil spirits, presided over by Satan, their king, sitting on his throne, grasping his sceptre of cruelty in his hand. "Who," asked Satan with a loud voice, "will go to earth and persuade men to accomplish the ruin of their souls?" "I," said one of the attendant spirits, "I will go." "And how will you persuade them?" asked the king. "I will persuade them," was the answer, "that there is no heaven." "No!" said the king, "that plan will not succeed. You will never be able to force such a belief on the generality of mankind." "Then," said a second, "I will go, and I will persuade them that there is no hell." "Neither will this plan," said Satan, "be sufficient. We want something which will appeal to men of all classes and all ages, and which will be acceptable to the human race as a whole." Thereupon a third dark spirit glided forward. "I will go," he said, "and I will tell every one that I approach that there is no hurry." And he was the chosen messenger.

Let us see to it that we do not fall into that snare. Let us never forget that the chances and the opportunities which are within our reach now will not, cannot last. It was apparently when he was least

expecting it, and when, through a continued course of ill-doing he had lulled himself into a false security, that the summons came to the steward in our parable, "*Render the account of thy stewardship.*" And sooner or later that same summons must come to us.

And it is only by preparing for it now with the same energy, the same resource, the same wisdom, that the children of this world so often display with regard to their fleeting and perishable interests, that we can "*lay up for ourselves riches in heaven,*" and be received hereafter into the "*eternal tabernacles.*"

THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS

BY THE VERY REV. PRINCIPAL ALEXANDER
STEWART, D.D.

THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS

"But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things : but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented."—LUKE xvi. 19-31 (especially ver. 25).

IN none of His parables does the Saviour paint the truth which He desired to impress upon the hearts and consciences of men in more vivid and striking colours than in this one. The hues become, indeed, almost lurid in their gloomy grandeur, and their intensity is increased by the impressive power of contrast as the scene is transferred from the Here to the Hereafter, and we follow with a shock of surprise the inverted destinies of the two chief actors in it. If, as some have supposed, our Lord's main purpose in the parable was "to startle us into serious religious thought," to make it like "a flash of lightning in the night, which lightens up a familiar landscape under an unfamiliar aspect, and awakens in the spectator unfamiliar feelings," He could not have adopted means better suited to this end. The very curiosity which we naturally entertain regarding the mysteries of the invisible and eternal world greatly

strengthens our interest at this apparent lifting up of a corner of the curtain which shrouds it, and forces us to a more earnest consideration of the principles of judgment which are here brought to light. There are some of our Lord's delineations, even the most beautiful of them all, which we may admire as beautiful pictures and then turn away from, without being touched by them, but this we can scarcely contemplate without bearing away a barbed arrow of doubt and fear rankling in our heart.

And yet it is not only possible, but extremely probable, that on the points which first attract our attention, and on which we think that here at length we have precise and reliable information, the parable, when more closely viewed, really tells us little. Christ took the features of His narrative from the beliefs and traditions of His time, and in doing so neither invests them with authority nor stops to disprove them. His purpose is far otherwise. It would be strange indeed if the dreams of Jewish Rabbis had succeeded in deciphering the relations, localities, and conditions of the world of spirits. But this they would have done had our Lord in adopting their teachings as the framework of His story meant to certify their accuracy. It would have been strange indeed had Christ, intending to reveal to men the hidden secrets, done so in so casual a manner. By using in regard to these things the current language of His day He at once made Himself intelligible to those whom He addressed, and rebuked the restless

spirit which would have overlooked the lessons He taught in the attempt to gratify a vain curiosity regarding the things which God keeps in His own hand.

The Jewish doctors taught that the invisible world was divided into two regions—Paradise, the abode of the blessed, and Gehenna, the place of suffering. These, though separated by a wall or fence, are full in view of each other, and the dwellers in the one can readily converse with those in the other. The inhabitants of Paradise are engaged in a perpetual feast ; those of Gehenna are the victims of the worm that dieth not and the fire that is not quenched. Again, at an Oriental banquet, where the guests do not sit but recline at table, each is brought very near, may by a slight movement lean upon the breast of, his left-hand neighbour. To be thus placed next the host was the highest, the most coveted, honour. Thus it was that the beloved disciple leaned on Jesus' bosom at the Last Supper. And so to lean on Abraham's bosom at the celestial banquet was in Jewish eyes the crowning felicity of Paradise. Neither the feast nor the flame can therefore be taken as throwing light upon the physical conditions of the other world. So far as the parable is concerned, they are representative and symbolical. But the spiritual realities to which they correspond are thereby only the more boldly and vividly impressed upon us.

There are several important and interesting aspects

in which this parable may be considered. I would ask your attention first to one or two points of interest or difficulty, and then dwell for a little on the thought suggested by the verse specially selected as our text.

I.

Our Saviour brings before us the picture of a rich and a poor man.

The one is the very type of opulence and comfort; the other of misfortune and suffering. In them we may say that "extremes meet,"—the extremes of the social scale. They meet,—for in the East poverty and misery are not thrust into a corner—out of sight as well as out of mind—but luxury and destitution exist side by side, and the beggar is laid down unrebuked within the shadow of the rich man's porch. So Lazarus beheld from day to day the gorgeous raiment and the sumptuous fare, and the rich man could not go forth on business or on pleasure without encountering the beggar's emaciated and disease-stricken form and appealing eyes. But "one thing happeneth alike to all"—death comes, and the question arises: Will the distinctions that are here so marked be perpetuated yonder? Have the so-called respectable of earth alone the hope of heaven? Is the palace of the King of kings like the mansion of an earthly lord, where the poor and

diseased can get no further than the gate ? There *are* distinctions, our Lord answers, in the other world. There, too, is happiness and suffering—the extreme of joy, the extreme of misery—to which the joys and pains of earth have no comparison. But, strange to say—and here the solemn warning rings out clearly and unmistakably—it may be that the evil things here may be succeeded by the comfort which eternity can give, and the recipient of good things here may afterwards be tormented. It does not follow that the well-to-do on earth are the well-doing either here or hereafter ; fates may be reversed ; the rich man dies and is buried, and in hell lifts up his eyes, being in torments ; while the beggar is carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom. Such is the warning ; and it hangs upon a "may be." Christ takes a single case of a rich man and a poor man, and by pointing out what happened in that case, He proves the possibility in every case. Thus He shakes the self-confidence of the Pharisees "who were covetous," and who derided what they heard from His lips. Thus He justifies His rebuke, "Ye are they which justify yourselves before men ; but God knoweth your hearts ; for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God." What was more highly esteemed among these "covetous" persons than to be "clothed in purple and fine linen," and to fare "sumptuously every day." Yet this of itself and by itself wins no esteem in God's

sight, and does not prevent the heaviest judgments from falling upon those who have enjoyed it.

But can it be the case that the relation here represented between the temporal and the eternal is a *necessary* one, that what we have said "may be," *must* be? Does the rich man suffer because he has been rich? Is the poor man rewarded because he has been poor? This view has been advocated, and at first sight appears to find support in the parable itself. There is nothing said about the moral character of those to whom such different lots were assigned. Other sayings of our Lord appear to have the same tendency. "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven." "Blessed be ye poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." "But woe unto you that are rich, for ye have received your consolation." But, on the one hand, we must bear in mind that in order not to distract the attention from the great truth which Christ at the moment wished to enforce, it was necessary to keep out of sight many points in themselves of much importance. And on the other hand we must bring to the interpretation of individual sayings the general principles of religion and common sense. It was surely a gospel for the poor that they might be saved in spite of their poverty, without going on to say that they would be saved because of it. And the hope of the rich man in his riches was sufficiently broken by the picture of one such in the Gehenna flame. The

rich man is expressly taken as a type of his class ; no great crime, no depth of vice, is laid to his charge, as balancing in the eyes of his Judge his wealth and worldly respectability. No great virtue is ascribed to the beggar which might take away from his fellows the hope of attaining his felicity. And yet we must believe the destiny of each to be not only contrary to human expectation, but in accordance with the essential principles of justice,—no arbitrary doom, still less a policy of retaliation. We can trace in the conduct of the rich man a too common inhumanity, a selfish indulgence, a callous indifference—the spirit of the Pharisee with its utter want of compassion for the publican and the sinner—a spirit which Jesus ever sternly condemned. What indeed is the ground on which in the great scene of judgment the King says unto those on His left hand, “Depart from me”? Is it not “For I was an hungred, and ye gave Me no meat ; I was thirsty, and ye gave Me no drink ; I was a stranger, and ye took Me not in ; naked, and ye clothed Me not ; sick and in prison, and ye visited Me not. Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to Me.” Lazarus was the rich man’s opportunity, but the spectacle of want and suffering was passed unheeded by. Of the character of Lazarus we have not even an indication, for upon his name, which means “God helpeth,” we can scarcely lay any stress. It was in common use among the Jews. Yet doubtless in him, outcast as he was, there was a true and

pure soul—a jewel now covered with dust and trodden underfoot, but which He who knew would set in the forefront of a royal crown. In him, it may well be, tribulation worked patience, and patience experience, and experience hope, and that hope did not make ashamed.

A modern poet has put the thought of the parable in a slightly different dress. A Pope dies and is interred with “incense, solemn dirge and prayer,” but his soul, chained by the earthly desires that had ruled his life, cannot leave the clay, but is doomed to share its corruption :—

“Without the Church, unburied on the ground,
 There lay in rags a beggar newly dead ;
 Above the dust no holy priest was found,
 No pious prayer was said !
 But round the corpse unnumbered lovely things,
 Hovering unseen by the proud passers-by,
 Formed, upward, upward, upward, with bright wings,
 A ladder to the sky !
 ‘And what are ye, O beautiful ?’ ‘We are’
 Answered the cherubim, ‘his deeds.’
 Then his soul, sparkling sudden as a star,
 Flashed from his mortal weeds,
 And lightly passing tier on tier, along
 The gradual pinions, vanished like a smile !
 Just then swept by the solemn-visaged throng
 From the apostle’s pile.
 ‘Knew ye this beggar ?’ ‘Knew ? a wretch who died
 Under the curse of our good Pope, now gone !’
 ‘Lov’d ye that Pope ?’ ‘He was our Church’s pride,
 And Rome’s most holy son !’
 Then did I muse, such are men’s judgments, blind
 In scorn or love ! In what unguessed-of things,
 Desires or deeds—do rags and purple find
 The fetters or the wings !”

II

Let us now turn to consider the thought suggested in the verse specially selected as our text.

“ But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst the good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things ; but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented.” There is here no stinging reproach, no stern denunciation. The sentence is all the more terrible from the calmness, even the tenderness of him who speaks. There is no resentment that from the abode of lost souls one should call upon him as “ Father Abraham ” ; but there is no hope in the gentle, compassionate, “ Son, remember.” And if we need a proof that the doom is not capricious and undeserved, we have it in the fact that Abraham can appeal from the Judge who has pronounced sentence to the man’s own condemning soul. “ Our own hearts condemn us, and God is greater than our hearts, and knoweth all things.” Is it not fair and equitable, Abraham would say, that so far as comfort is bestowed, a law of compensation should prevail, and it should not in every form be poured into one cup ? And in so far as it is matter of award, what use didst thou make of the blessings bestowed on thee ? Side by side with thy good things were Lazarus’ evil things ; hadst thou sought to restore the balance then, it

perhaps had not been so fearfully against thee now. But thou didst look upon them as *thy* good things, to be used for thine own pleasure, and not with a sense of responsibility in God's sight, and as the minister of pity and charity. "Son, remember"—ah, my brethren, when we come to stand at the bar of Judgment we shall need no other condemnation than that which our own hearts will be able to supply. We shall be the same persons then as now, and the links of memory will unite our present to our past, and bring before us with awful certainty the things done and undone which make up that past. We know how this mysterious faculty proves its power from time to time in our experience. Scenes and objects which we seemed to have long forgotten start up before the mental eye with curious vividness. A trifle, some fugitive resemblance of place or person, is sufficient to recall them, and we live over again the experiences we would fain have consigned to oblivion, and in which our part was often anything but worthy. Why is it that the things we wish forgotten are the last to be forgotten? For a single reason: because whatever fixes the attention upon an object, or surrounds it with a special interest, helps to fix it in the memory. And conscience supplies such a stimulus, the struggle between right and wrong, the emotional tumult with which that is accompanied, not only gives our act a permanent influence on our character, but stamps it indelibly upon our remem-

brance. The very effort to forget only gives it the firmer hold, and when it had sunk away beneath the horizon of our life, and though days and years have come and gone, it bursts anew upon us as the lightning flash and convicts us of error and of sin.

Can you, the man of middle age, or you whose hair many winters have whitened, look back upon the days of your youth without recalling many a scene which you would gladly have banished from knowledge and from memory? What are the visions which come before you most vividly. The joys or the sorrows, the blessings or the sins? Are the scenes you can remember with satisfaction, as having played in them a part of unalloyed truthfulness, of disinterested goodness, in anything like so large a proportion to those of unworthiness and wrong-doing as God's gifts have borne to the suffering He has sent? Son, remember the ingratitude to a parent who watched over your cradle and led you through the years of infancy, shielding your young head from the storms of life, and bestowing upon you the best she had. Have you not often longed to kneel down again at a sainted mother's knee, and weep out some act of thoughtlessness, of folly? Son, remember the friendship betrayed, when affection and interest came into collision; remember the passionate word, the sudden blow, the wisdom despised, the love disregarded, the hate cherished. Remember how you set out in the world with high hopes and good resolutions, principles that were to

be maintained and conventional practices that were to be avoided and put down. Remember how soon these thoughts were pronounced quixotic, and you adapted your ways to the ways of those around you, and made their littleness, meanness, and uncharitableness your own. Is there no dead face upon which imagination now and again paints a look of harrowing reproach or withering contempt? Is there no life you have guided in the broad way of destruction, further, perhaps, than you would care yourself to follow, no innocence corrupted by your arts, no soul the worse because you have lived? Is there no misery and woe which have cried aloud to you, which you have passed indifferently by, without mercy if without scorn? If you have had the Mammon of unrighteousness, have you therewith made friends who, when you fail, may receive you into everlasting habitations?

"Son, remember"—is there not in memory not only judgment, but punishment? Milton describes Satan on his journey to invade the innocence of Eden, as yet visited with compunction:—

"Horror and doubt distract
His troubled thoughts, and from the bottom stir
The hell within him, for within him hell
He brings, and round about him, nor from hell
One step, no more than from himself, can fly
By change of place: now conscience wakes despair
That slumbered; wakes the bitter memory,
Of what he was, what is, and what must be
Worse; of worse deeds worse sufferings must ensue."¹

¹ *Paradise Lost*, book iv.

And a more recent poet has pictured the horrors of such remembrance with no less truth than force:—

“The mind, that broods o’er guilty woes,
Is like the scorpion girt by fire,
In circles narrowing as it glows
The flames around their captive close,
Till inly searched by thorns and throes,
And maddening in her ire,
One sad and sole relief she knows,
The sting she nourished for her foes,
Whose venom never yet was vain,
Gives but one pang, and cures all pain,
And darts into her desperate brain,
So do the dark in soul expire,
Or live like scorpion girt by fire ;
So writhes the mind remorse hath riven,
Unfit for earth, undoomed for heaven ;
Darkness above, despair beneath,
Around it flame, within it death.”

Do such thoughts lie upon your heart like a nightmare ? Do they seem to you dark and gloomy and alien from your daily life ? Then awake from the sleep that oppresses you, anticipate the judgment, cast out everything that offends, make your peace with heaven, and give your heart to God and the doing of His will. Not yet are *we* where the great gulf stretches, “so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot ; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence.” *Now* there is no gulf which cannot be bridged ; *now* is the time of reconciliation, of peace. Strive to make your life now such that the remembrance of it shall

be a blessing, not a curse—a life of faith in God, of love to Christ, of fellowship towards man; let riches be sanctified by a wise stewardship and poverty by a submissive patience—that not the “Depart from Me” may one day be addressed to you, but, “Come, ye blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”

UNPROFITABLE SERVANTS ;

OR, THE TOILSOME LIFE

BY REV. ALFRED ROWLAND, D.D., LL.B.

UNPROFITABLE SERVANTS ; OR, THE TOILSOME LIFE.

"But which of you, having a servant plowing or feeding cattle, will say unto him by and by, when he is come from the field, Go and sit down to meat ? and will not rather say unto him, Make ready wherewith I may sup, and gird thyself, and serve me, till I have eaten and drunken ; and afterward thou shalt eat and drink ? Doth he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him ? I trow not. So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants : we have done that which was our duty to do."—LUKE xvii. 7-10.

THIS parable is often neglected by religious teachers, and is only lightly touched upon by most commentators. One reason for its neglect may be that it has no historical setting. It therefore lacks a certain interest which attaches to other parables. We know nothing about the occasion, the place, or the reason of its delivery, although this evangelist is generally especially careful to allude to these. Most ingenious and varied attempts have been made to show the connection of this parable with what precedes and follows it, but they are unsatisfactory. I think it probable that there was not any connection, and that Luke himself did not know more

than this, that these words were somewhere uttered by Jesus.

Real pearls are not less valuable even though the string that held them is broken. However much we may regret it, we cannot picture to ourselves the Lord telling this parable as we can picture Him when narrating the parable of the sower to the people standing on the shore of the lake.

But perhaps our neglect of this Divine message may be due to the fact that its teaching seems very stern and forbidding. It does not appear to be in harmony with the gracious words which usually fell from the lips of our Lord. It was not like Him to represent life as an endless series of arduous duties, to declare that we were to expect no thanks after a brave attempt to discharge our responsibilities, and that when we have done our very best we have only done our duty, and must confess that we are unprofitable servants. At first sight these words from Him seem so unnatural that it is absolutely certain no forger would have invented them, and least of all would they have been recorded by the beloved physician unless he had been confident that Jesus really uttered them, for it was he who liked to linger over the graciousness of his Lord, and who preserved for us the stories of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son.

Let us look at this picture of a toilsome life. Its elements are found in the work of a slave in the field, which was the earliest, and is still the most

fundamental form of labour. Our rural labourers have often had much to complain of, but their condition is infinitely better than that of those with whom the Lord sympathised. It was not in vain that He said to them, what He still says to all, "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." He was speaking to His disciples about the condition of these men, for spiritual purposes, and represented things not as they should be, but as they are. "Look at that field-slave," said He, "he works hard from dawn to sunset, ploughing the field or feeding and tending the sheep, but even then his work is not done. New duties await him when he enters the homestead. His master will not say to him, 'Come at once and sit down to meat,' but will expect him to gird up his loins and first see that his master is served before he has bite or sup himself. Even then he has only done his duty. His master does not consider himself specially indebted to him, for this slave is his property and is bound to acknowledge 'I am but an unprofitable servant.'"

Our Lord unquestionably implies—indeed He states—that this ought to be our attitude towards God. We are not our own, but His. We are bound to render Him service, and instead of questioning His will, we are simply to do it. Even when we have done some work, we have no right to consider ourselves absolved from further effort. And at the close of life we must remember we have only done our duty, and humbly acknowledge that we

are but unprofitable servants. Observe, however, that Jesus does not imply that this is *God's* opinion about us, or that He will act towards us as a stern master would. Indeed, those who most readily see their own unprofitableness are they to whom at last He will say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

This parable has been variously interpreted. It has been suggested that it represents what God had appeared to be under the old dispensation, and as the Pharisees still represented Him as being. But is there not truth for all times and ages here? Sometimes life does seem a hard, unrewarded struggle. Some people find in this world only the drudgery of life, and we must learn to encourage ourselves under this burdensomeness by the sweet promise of an unseen future.

"A sacred burden is the life ye bear,
Look on it, lift it, bear it solemnly ;
Stand up beneath it steadfastly,
Fail not for sorrow, falter not for sin,
But onward, upward, till the goal ye win."

I.

Let us think a little on the drudgery life.

Jesus Christ was the greatest and truest teacher the world has ever known. He did not misrepresent the facts of human experiences, nor did He try

to keep out of sight what was hard and forbidding in them. He was the Revealer of God, the Image of the Invisible, the representative of Him who sends storms which desolate the earth as well as the calm, sunny days which gladden it ; of Him who suffers poisonous flowers to grow in the hedge which protect the corn, given for the support of man. And this all-wise Creator has not made life smooth and easy, but to the vast majority of men and women it is a hard, and in many instances a bitter, struggle. Some of us know this for ourselves. One, perhaps, has the cares of a great business on him, and amid his losses and secret anxieties he sometimes wishes for the old days when, employed by some one else, he could leave all care behind directly the hour for home-going came. Another may be ill-paid and even tyrannically treated ; his employer or his immediate superior in the warehouse or in the office never seems satisfied, do what he may, and often he has to choke down indignant anger as best he may. Another, perhaps, wishes he had even that to endure ; but to him it seems impossible to obtain a situation of any kind, and, with willingness and eagerness to work, he has no chance in the great crowd of competitors. If any one asks him, "Why stand you here all the day idle ?" he would have to answer, with bitterness, "Because no man has hired me." Others, again, in the home life have to endure drudgery, even more painful, because of its monotony. The busy wife, who is always plan-

ning and contriving how to eke out the inadequate income—turning the children's dresses ; abstaining from innocent pleasures ; thinking, or even working, when the household sleeps ; trying to put a brave face while meeting a difficulty which would crush a more cowardly heart—finds life a heavy burden. God sees greater heroism in some of our homes than He ever saw yet on a battlefield. The crowns of heaven and the crowns of earth go to very different people. It was not Jesus only who was crowned with thorns first and with glory after.

Possibly most of us know something of this ; but how much more sad is the lot of others around us, whose condition now and again pushes itself into notoriety !—men fighting for work of any sort ; a mother smothering her babes rather than see them die of hunger ; girls working nine hours a day to earn a few shillings. This is our civilisation, and the great heart of our Lord is big with pity over it all. He will judge those who are unjust executors and cruel oppressors. Meantime, He demands of all His people that in their own spheres at least all their powers should be used to lessen these woes, and to exact from others no more than is fair and just.

II.

Our Lord touches on another sore in life when
He alludes to the thanklessness of much
work.

He does not ask, "Ought the master to thank his servant?" but "Does he do so?" Some of the best work done in the world gets no thanks at all. The captain on deck may have a fine uniform, and pleasant chats, and a testimonial from the passengers; but no one thinks of the engineers and the stokers who drive the ship through the sea. Probably most of us receive no thanks for what we do in our business, or in our home, nor as a matter of fact do we expect them; while, as for Christian work, there is often less of such encouragement in it. The Sunday-school teacher who has often gone tired and weak to work; the visitor to the poor and sick, shrinking from the dreadful atmosphere; the young men who spare their precious evenings to help some less favoured than themselves; the writers who deny themselves rest that they may encourage others to denounce sin by their brave words; the deacons who steadily carry on the drudgery of work connected with a great organisation such as the Church—are often left without thanks. If they waited for the expression of gratitude they would never work again. But their inspiration is love for the Master, and in proportion

to its force their work is both persistent and joyful. The way of the Church, then, and of the world, is truly depicted in this parable.

III.

No doubt this thanklessness and drudgery is Divinely ordained, and on the whole is good for us.

We Christians are not only to be loving children of our heavenly Father, but the dutiful servants of a Divine Master. And there are times when the clarion call of duty is better for us than the caressing accents of love. Never give up doing what you know to be right because you fail to find pleasure in it. For you it may be best to do steadfastly the duty of the day simply because God ordains it. And though you find the path to heaven steep and hard to climb, the severe and bracing effort will develop your strength and raise you into a purer atmosphere.

IV.

Whatever your efforts, bethink yourself of the way in which you are to regard and estimate them.

Do what you may, you are to esteem yourselves but "unprofitable servants." I think these words

have often been misunderstood. They constitute a favourite text for discourse on the non-meritoriousness of works ; but I can find no warrant in Christ's teaching for the hard theology which denies all merit to man. The twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew, even if it stood alone, would suffice to show that to be a fallacy. True, we do not win heaven by our merit, but through the merits of our Lord ; yet our recompense and our service there will be the outcome of fidelity and earnestness here—he being made ruler over ten cities who has most proved his preparedness to do so by service here.

Words like these in our parable are not intended to show how God will esteem our service, but how we ought to esteem it. We are doing Him no favour by our greatest sacrifices. We must not give ourselves airs of complacency on the one hand, nor assume the air of martyrs on the other. We are not to think of ourselves at all, but of God, who, by His grace, has enabled us to do what little we have done, and leaving all recompense to His splendid generosity, we must confess, in all lowliness and honesty, that we are unprofitable servants and have done that which it was our duty to do.

Let us ask ourselves whether we have done that which it was our duty to do. Have we ever attempted any service for God ? Have we made any sacrifices for Him ? Have we ever obeyed His chief and first command, the foundation of all others, "This is the will of Him that sent Me, that ye believe on Him

whom He hath sent." If the servant who can say "We have done what Thou hast commanded us to do" is compelled to confess "I am an unprofitable servant," what must be said of those who have never attempted to do what He has commanded? Let us make our way to the Cross of the Saviour, who, even to the death, found it more blessed to minister than to be ministered unto, and there, in the light of His self-sacrifice for us while we were yet sinners, all that we have done or can do will dwindle into nothingness. It is there that inspiration comes for the acts of heroism demanded of some, and for the life of drudgery imposed upon others. There in spirit let us kneel, and it will be our joy, having done our utmost as His servants, still to stand before Him and wait.

Some of the thoughts in this contribution were suggested by an admirable paper in the *Expositor*.

THE UNJUST JUDGE ;
OR, PERSUASIVES TO PERSISTENT PRAYER

By REV. ALBERT GOODRICH, D.D.

THE UNJUST JUDGE ;

OR, PERSUASIVES TO PERSISTENT PRAYER

“ There was in a city a judge, which feared not God, and regarded not man,” &c.—LUKE xviii. 1-8.

THE purpose of this parable is, as the evangelist says, to teach that “ men ought always to pray and not to faint.” Jesus Himself knew nothing of fainting in prayer ; He was ever strong in prayer ; He prayed much. Jesus, however, could sympathise with men who were tempted to faint in prayer.

Some positively reject prayer ; “ they do not,” they say, “ believe in it.” All things are ordered, fixed ; all things move according to universal and invariable law. It is folly to think that our prayers can affect that fixed order ; and if they could, it would be worse than folly for us to wish to affect it. But to faint in prayer is not thus positively to reject prayer ; it is rather to become hopeless with respect to prayer, because we have prayed so long and so often without any definite answer. The mind does not so much reject prayer as the heart becomes weary of it ; there seems to be no use in prayer ;

the things asked for, whether they be for ourselves or for society, seem as far off as ever. It was to this class of persons that Jesus Christ spoke this parable, that "men ought always to pray and not to faint."

The unjust judge "feared not God nor regarded man"—an ungodly, unscrupulous creature. There have been, and still are, especially in the East, not a few such non-human men. This judge was quite cynical; he coolly admitted his unscrupulousness to himself and to others; he laughed at any kind of moral restraint. Placed to defend the oppressed and to administer justice, he oppressed the widow and sold justice to the highest bidder. He loved a bribe—a good fat one—but such as the poor widow could not bribe. Another thing this unjust judge, without heart or conscience, loved was his ease. He hated to be bothered—on this side he was vulnerable even to the poorest. The weak have this weapon—they can give trouble; they can make themselves a nuisance; they can sting the huge beast, the unjust judge, so that he will give or do almost anything to get rid of them. The poor widow used well this weapon; so well, that this unjust judge began to think, "I do not care for this widow; she may be vile or good; her cause may be just or unjust, her adversary real or imaginary, I don't care. But she is a very pertinacious person. She will give me no peace. She is likely, for her voice gets shriller, to go mad. She

will then create a scene." "Why," with a mock fear, he adds, "she might set upon and even strike me. The easiest way of getting rid of her is to grant her prayer, whatever it is. I will avenge her."

Christ here both compares and contrasts God with this unjust judge. To-day we experience a certain shock at any comparison of this moral monster with the all-perfect Lord God. But in the day of Christ feeling on this point was not so keen, and we might, perhaps, also say, not so fastidious. We shall say more on this further on.

The widow manifestly represents the church of Christ. In this world Christ's church often appears to be forgotten ; her souls delivered up as sheep to the wolves ; she is widowed, bereaved of strength, lonely, neglected ; plundered and oppressed by the adversary, unable to obtain any redress or help, her very prayers apparently unattended to. And such, also, is the plight too often of the believing individual soul. Jesus Christ speaks this parable to teach such that they ought always, even in such circumstances, to pray and not to faint. Let us, then, draw out the reasons contained in this parable for always praying.

I.

Because God, no less than the unjust judge, *can answer prayer.*

The judge could avenge the widow. To think that God has not power to answer our prayer is to

deny Him. God surely to His child man is no less than is the human father to his child. God has will no less than we ; there is a sphere—discuss not for the moment the extent of that sphere—in which His Divine will is effective, as there is a sphere in which our human will is effective. “ If ye, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father in heaven give His Holy Spirit to them that ask Him ? ”

An organist may not be able to turn his organ into a steam engine, or into a vessel of war, but he is able so to manipulate its parts, combine its notes, as to produce now this tune, or that sonata, or that fugue. And God may not be able—there is no need to discuss the point—to make yesterday to-day, or to annihilate the law of gravitation, but God surely can manipulate the laws of things and of life, combine them so as to produce, within the limits of our reasonable prayers, this or that result which shall answer the cry of our poor souls, widowed of strength and companionship. God is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think.

Then let us pray, “ Avenge me of mine adversary ; deliver me from this pride, this vanity, this evil temper, this lust, this covetousness, which is robbing our souls of peace and our lives of righteousness. Avenge us as a church, deliver us from spiritual sloth, from lack of prayer, of zeal, of liberality ; deliver us from the foes of our work, the adversary,

huge and brutal, of drink, of gambling, of impurity, of corruption in public life." God is able to hear our cry herein, though He has borne long with us. "He doeth according to His will in the armies of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth." Of this Judge "none can stay His hand or say unto Him, What doest Thou?"

II.

And we should continue always in prayer, because God is *altogether willing to hear our cry.*

My copy of *Trench on the Parables* belonged to a devoted missionary before it came into my hands. In his comments on this parable, Trench says, "Our Lord here compares God to the unjust judge." Over against this, in the margin, the missionary has written, "Not compared, but contrasted." Both, I think, are right. Many in our Lord's day who had prayed and prayed for the coming of the Messiah, who would avenge them of the adversary, the Roman power, were now fainting in prayer, because no answer had come. To them God seemed somewhat like an unjust judge. Christ did not say to them, as some Pharisee might have said, "Your thought of God is very wicked; it is impossible to God to be as an unjust judge; it is blasphemy to suppose for a

moment He can be." On the contrary, Christ carries the dark suspicion concerning God out into the broad daylight. "Well, be it so," Christ seems to say, "that you are as a widow, bereaved in soul, harassed by adversaries, pitilessly robbed and evil entreated, and that to your prayers for help thus far God has been silent like unto an unjust judge. That, hard as it is, is no reason for fainting in prayer. Unjust judges, even, will hear the persistent cry; for a little peace they will do what they will not for justice; to get rid of being bothered they will stir themselves when they would not for humanity. Therefore, though God should be according to your worst fears, you ought still to pray, and if you persevere you will succeed."

But then Jesus, having met them with this *argumentum ad hominem*, passes to the argument *a fortiori*. Shall not God, the God who loves His own and cannot do wrong, shall not He "avenge His own elect who cry day and night unto Him"? If the unjust judge hears the persistent cry, how much more will the righteous Judge, the everlasting Father, hear His people? Here God is contrasted with the unjust judge. Then, however we think of God, however much the heavens seem as brass to our prayers, "men ought always to pray and not to faint."

III.

The parable supplies a third reason for praying always, viz., *God is bound to hear* us because of our relation to Him.

There is a contrast here not only between God and the judge, but between the widow and the elect. The widow was nothing to the unjust judge—just one of a multitude. She may have been like many such suppliants, not a humble soul, rather a pushing, self-seeking, perhaps revengeful, person, but God's elect are at least those who by faith and love are specially related to Him. He has noted and approved of their struggles; He has already done much for them; He has joy in their work of faith and labour of love. If, then, the unjust judge heard the cry of the widow, a stranger to him, because of her continual coming, will not God hear the continual cry of His own elect—those whom He knows and loves?

The cry of the sinner who loves his sin but dreads the penalty, the cry of the craven and cowardly, the cry of the formalist and insincere, the cry which is not habitual, but extorted by some danger and forgotten when the danger is passed—these cries God may not hear; but the prayer of His own elect, those who are in the habit of speaking with Him and upon whom He has lavished love, those who are struggling to please Him, will

He not hear them though He bear long with them ?
I tell you He will hear them speedily.

IV.

Our parable further suggests as an additional reason for always praying that it *is God's nature and office to hear prayer.*

The judge was put in his office for the express purpose of hearing the pleas of the oppressed. Suppose the widow's cry was a true and proper prayer, and that her adversary was not imaginary. The judge, even if she were a little too urgent, was bound to attend to her. If he did not, he failed in his duty. Do not God's elect offer prayer for the right things ? The idea here is they are not asking amiss for something to consume upon their own lusts ; they are asking for deliverance from evil, from pride, wrath, covetousness, from the foes which hinder God's work—as the spiritual indifference of the people and the wicked persons who tempt to drunkenness and vice. Day and night for long have God's people cried with respect to these, "Avenge me of mine adversary."

Now, it belongs to God to answer true prayer as it belongs to the judge to do justice, or as it does to man to pray. The very being and nature, the very office and relation of God with respect to us

is to hear our cry. It would, I think we may in all reverence say, be as ungodly in God not to hear true prayer as it is unfatherly in a father not to hear his children's cry for bread. Not to hear prayer God must ungod Himself. A god that hears not prayer is no god to us ; we cannot, we need not, worship such. Then since it is God's nature and property to hear prayer, will He not hear His own elect who ask according to His will ? He must by the holy necessities of His own blessed nature. He cannot go against His nature and office. He cannot deny Himself. "I tell you He will hear them speedily."

V.

And the parable gives another reason for always praying, viz., *the authority of Jesus Christ.*

"*I tell you* that He will avenge them speedily." Christ has argued conclusively, but He relies for inspiring doubting souls with faith more on His personal assurance than on His arguments. "*I say unto you ; I, who know full well how your prayers seem to be quite neglected, how God appears to you in this matter as one of your unjust judges, I tell you God will hear you. I who have come out from the bosom of God, and who am in the bosom of God, who have ever enjoyed uninterrupted communion with Him, I who have*

explored the infinite depths of God, who know His mind and heart, His will and purposes, I tell you, He will hear your prayers. I whom you know to be sincere and true, whom you have trusted and never found reason to doubt, I, because you so trust Me and that I may sustain your fainting faith, I tell you, God will hear your prayers." And do not all the devout, all those who have been most in the secrets and leading of God, tell us the same thing? Prophets and psalmists, saints and confessors of every age, all unite in saying, "I tell you God hears prayer, and God will hear thy prayer." "Men therefore ought always to pray and not to faint."

Are we fainting in prayer? Our daily prayers, are we fainting in them? Are we growing weary in prayer? Are we suspecting prayer is not of much use? Are we giving place to objections to prayer? Ponder, dear brethren, this parable. "Men ought always to pray and not to faint."

THE PHARISEE AND THE
PUBLICAN;
OR, THE PRAYER THAT BRINGS SALVATION

BY REV. W. J. TOWNSEND, D.D.

THE PHARISEE AND THE PUBLICAN;

OR, THE PRAYER THAT BRINGS SALVATION

“This man went down to his house justified rather than the other.”—LUKE xviii. 14.

THE *motif* of this parable is plainly stated. Jesus “spake also this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and set all others at naught.” Like most of the parables of Jesus, it was drawn from circumstances of constant occurrence and great familiarity. The exactness of the representation would be patent to all His hearers. The two worshippers might have been seen any day ascending the steps to the courts of the temple. They stand out in finely-set contrast to each other. The Pharisees were a wealthy, fashionable, and popular party of the Jews. They were originally a truly godly sect which arose in previous ages as a protest against prevailing ungodliness and apostasy. As time passed on their religion hardened itself into mere formalism, they lost all spirituality and true devoutness, they

divorced morality and religion, they multiplied rites and ceremonies, they were painfully punctilious as to outward observances, and cared more for minute trifles than for vital principles. In their lives they gave way to the impulses of the natural man, were rapacious and covetous, anxious to obtain honour from men, to fill the chief places in the synagogue or the Sanhedrin, were censorious and cynical, uncharitable and hypocritical. They were false interpreters of Scripture and attached more importance to the traditions of the fathers than to the Oracles of God. Their ideas of prayer were of the crudest character. It consisted to them in the repetition of certain brief formulas so many times in the day, sometimes running into hundreds. They thought to satisfy God in a simply legal way, and therefore multiplied precepts and requirements of an external character, by observing which they thought to merit entrance into eternal life. They even thought to lay up a superfluity of merit by doing more than the letter of the law commanded. But while labouring painfully thus to win heaven by their own legal observances they neglected inward purity and holiness.

Christ denounced this empty religion in severest terms, He exposed the hollowness and hypocrisy of their professions and held them up to public reprobation. He demanded from them, as from all, inward holiness and spiritual life. He insisted that outward correctness of life should spring from a

renewed heart and a right conscience. Undoubtedly good men existed among the Pharisees, but the whole system tended either to manufacture hypocrites or to produce in earnest, sensitive souls a tortuous introspection and a fear of constant estrangement from the Divine Father.

The Pharisee of the parable is an exact representative of the class. The exact form of the Greek (*statheis*) might be rendered, "taking his stand," as though he assumed a posture of importance and presumption. His prayer, or rather address, was entirely self-congratulatory, and seemed intended to show that on the whole God was his debtor rather than his benefactor. Nothing shows a real man more than his prayers. They are the essential self-revelation. Judged by this standard, it can only be said of the man, "Thou art weighed in the balances, and found wanting." He was deficient in self-knowledge, in a knowledge of sin, of God Himself, of the nature of true religion, and of the whole realm of godliness. It was the case of the Church of Laodicea presented in one personality, and to him the words of Christ exactly apply, "Thou sayest, I am rich, and have gotten riches, and have need of nothing ; and knowest not that thou art the wretched one, and miserable and poor and blind and naked." This man was a perfectionist to himself. Depravity belonged to the rest of the race, he was holy, "after the straitest sect of his religion." He lived, fulfilling the law down to the jot and the

tittle, nay, even exceeding the requirement of the law in giving tithes of *all* he possessed. Such a man surely was absolutely perfect. He had nothing to ask God for, he could only recite his own excellences and congratulate his God on having such a perfect child. "Not like the rest of men . . . nor even as this publican." There was nothing more true than the last clause. This man was proud, vainglorious, boastful. Even if he preserved an outward decorousness of morality, his heart was a nest of unclean birds which could only croak like the raven or hoot like the owl.

The publican "was not as this" Pharisee. It is true he belonged to a hated class, but publicans were as precious to Christ as Pharisees, and therefore Nicodemus or Zaccheus were equally favoured by Him who received every sinner in whose heart were the elements of godliness.

Publicans of the time of Christ were the collectors of the custom dues on exports. They were subordinates to the chief officials of certain districts, who in their turn were responsible to the Emperor or the Senate at Rome. The official leased the customs of a certain district for a fixed annual sum, and by surcharges upon the people reaped what harvest he could for himself. He employed underlings who either collected for him or paid him a certain amount and in their turn made profit for themselves by rapacious overtaking. There was thus abundant temptation and opportunity for

grasping conduct, for grinding the poor, and for much corruption. The class as a whole made much of their privilege, and therefore came to be a by-word of reproach for their covetousness and overreaching. But as in the case of the Pharisees there were noble exceptions among these men. They were not case-hardened in pride and formalism like the Pharisees. They were open sinners, but they had susceptible hearts. They were responsive to the Saviour's message in a remarkable degree. They are the only class of men who in any number are said to have gathered to Him. "Now all the publicans and sinners were drawing near unto Him" (Luke xv. 1). But classed as they were among "sinners" and "harlots," the saving grace of Christ was realised by them more readily than by the professional perfectionists, and Christ said to these, "The publicans and the harlots go into heaven before you."

The publican of the parable stands in entire contrast to the Pharisee in every respect. He might have been openly profane and unscrupulous, but he was not encased in pride; he might not be learned in the demands of the law, but he was able to mourn over his own sinfulness. He does not "take his stand" like the self-satisfied egotist, but, "standing far off," he makes no boastful or patronising address to the Almighty, but in shame, in self-depreciation, in complete abandonment, he falters out the prayer, "God be merciful to me a sinner."

The Pharisee's prayer centred in self. It was all egoism and egotism; there was no spirit of religion in it. True religion looks not at self save to mourn over its deficiencies and transgressions. Prayer often begins with thanks, but then it is praise for mercies received and love manifested in countless blessings. It is not prayer when it is absorbed in the contemplation of the man's own excellences, or when it exhausts its vocabulary in extolling his own virtuous deeds. This man had nothing to ask from God, he had no sense of adoration in his soul, he had no craving for Divine fellowship nor for holy converse; he was purely and exclusively self-righteous and self-occupied.

The publican had nothing to boast of. He stood just within the Court of the Gentiles, self-abashed and ashamed. He had not one good thing to plead before God. He did not fast, he did not give tithes, he did no excellent and worthy deeds, or if he did they were not done from an idea of merit, but from the promptings of a tender heart. He felt as though in venturing into the house of prayer at all he was an intruder. "He would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven." He did not look round with a satisfied glance to observe other occupiers of the court from whom he might draw favourable comparisons of himself. There was no pride or boastfulness left in him. He was, he thought, an intruder there, but he *must* come to God or perish. Conviction of sin had laid hold upon him, it had

struck its arrow to the depths of his soul; he was conscious, not of his wealth or his position, but of his danger as a sinner and his fate as a criminal, condemned by the law of God without and the law of conscience within. Therefore he did all he could—he confessed his sin. There was no apology, there was no attempt to hide it or to minimise it. It was clear, open, heart-felt confession. That is the real evidence of true repentance. “I acknowledged my sin unto Thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord; and Thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin” (Psa. xxxii. 5).

In thus making full and sincere confession the publican fulfilled in effect the Divine requirement. A sincere confession carries in itself the full repentance, the simple faith, the adventurous trust which wins a complete salvation. As the seed contains in itself in embryo all that the plant becomes or can ever be, so is confession, when real and heart-felt, the seed from which alone comes the holy life. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John i. 5). Therefore the publican received a great blessing. He sought for mercy, he expected nothing but mercy, and he obtained it. But he obtained much more. Mercy also is a seed which when bestowed opens out a fulness the blessedness of which is inexhaustible. Therefore came the words of Christ, “I say unto

you, This man went down to his house justified." It was a great blessing. He had humbled himself, and he was exalted. He had taken the lowliest position, and the Master had said, "Go up higher ;" and like other commands of Christ, the words were a prophecy and assurance of exaltation and honour which could not be reckoned nor conceived. They meant all that can be imagined to be wrapped up in the promise, "I will give unto you eternal life."

Justification is a complex blessing. It is not to be confused with other spiritual privileges and conditions which come to the believer in Christ, but it is their forerunner and their pledge. Its first experience is a moral or spiritual one. As a forensic term it brings before us man's legal standing and condition in the sight of God. As the publican stood in the temple court the deepest feeling of his soul was that he was "a sinner." Sin is not a mistake, it is not an error, it is not stumbling upwards towards God, but a descent from God. It is rebellion, defiance, departure not only from the express requirements of the Divine law, but acting against the inward law of conscience. From a constant state of sin, arising from an evil will and a deceitful heart, there comes a consciousness of guilt which no sophistry can explain away and no opiates can drug. That sense of guilt has led mankind in all ages to invent and practise methods by which the Deity can be propitiated and the terrible stuff that weighs upon the heart can be removed.

It is the most pathetic story of all the ages to read of the efforts of Buddha to escape from sin and its results by cutting off or subduing the passions and even the appetites of human nature, of Brahma with the purification to be wrought out by almost endless transmigrations, and of all the other nostrum-mongers of succeeding centuries. But the helpless family of humanity has still struggled in the shame and misery of iniquity. No proposition of Euclid was ever more fully demonstrated than has been this fact, that no effort of human nature can cleanse away the guilt and shame of sin.

But the things impossible to man are possible to God, and the mercy of God has provided a way of salvation by which the worst sinners can be rescued and redeemed. The publican had heard something of it. As a Jew, he would be drilled in a knowledge of the law of Moses and the hymn-book of the old Hebrew Church. However far he might have departed from the teachings of his early life, the memory of them would still be fresh. When the better nature had its resurrection he came like the prodigal—"I will arise and go to my father." And he did. Overwhelmed with the burden of sin, he went to the house of God, where prayer was wont to be made, and there was not a more sincere penitent found in those courts that day, nor was there one who carried away a greater blessing.

"He went down to his house justified." The first element in justification is forgiveness. "Come

now, and let us reason together," says God, "and though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow : and though red like crimson, they shall be as wool." This is very sweet reasoning. The man asks and God gives. He says, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner," and Christ says, "Thy sins, which are many, are forgiven thee." God and man are reconciled ; the Father and the Son are united in mutual love. This is not justification, but it leads to it. Justification is the giving a man a new standing in the family of God. It is the restoration of the man to sonship and heirship ; it is treating the man as though he had never sinned.

Forgiveness with God leads to a complete reversal of the sinner's condemnation, and he is justified—that is, "reckoned righteous"—and therefore has a claim and title to all the honours and privileges of the house and family of God. It is here that the unspeakably precious atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ comes in. Even before the literal offering on the cross was effected, by type and symbol the Lamb of God was set forth as slain for the sins of the world. This gave the opportunity for the exercise of faith on the part of the sinner. Faith is the hand that grasps and claims the blessing from the hand of God. It was through faith in the promised Christ that the old saints from Abel downwards entered into the kingdom of God. The way to God has been the same in all the ages,

but it was made plain and clear as never before when by His offering on Calvary Christ "opened the new and living way and consecrated it for us."

When the sinner is forgiven, cleansed, restored, he is thereby justified ; he is qualified to receive all the blessings comprehended in salvation, and, being "filled with the Spirit," he is changed "from glory to glory" until he is "meet to be partaker of the inheritance of the saints in light."

What was the lot of the Pharisee of this marvellous parable is not told us. Let him alone ; a sad awakening would come to him some day. Happy indeed would he be if it were an awakening to his pride and self-righteousness ; then he also would shrink back in horror from his sinful state and utter the publican's prayer. If so, He who is no respecter of persons would rejoice to welcome even the proudest Pharisee, who may fairly be reckoned as "the chief of sinners."

THE POUNDS, A PARABLE OF TEN

BY REV. J. MORGAN GIBBON

THE POUNDS, A PARABLE OF TEN

"He said therefore, A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom, and to return. And he called his ten servants, and delivered them ten pounds, and said unto them, Occupy till I come. But his citizens hated him, and sent a message after him, saying, We will not have this man to reign over us."—LUKE xix. 12-14.

MR. LECKY, in his *Map of Life*—a book full of mellow wisdom—says that one of the most important lessons that experience teaches is that, on the whole and in the great majority of cases, success in life depends more on character than on either intellect or fortune. This law is one that cannot be questioned, and it becomes more and more apparent as civilisation advances.

Well, that extremely important lesson was brought out very impressively in our Lord's parable of the Talents.

That is the story of *genius*. All the characters were exceptionally gifted. Even the man with one *talent* stood far above the average. Yet it was not talent, but character, that told in each case. Character showed itself as clearly and as nobly in dealing with two as with five talents. And it was the

lack of *character*, not the sparsity of gifts, that landed the third man in the outer darkness.

This, on the other hand, is a parable of the common people—people with small powers and contracted spheres of action, that is to say, the vast majority of men in every age. It is the story of the world. The people in Jericho, where Jesus now was, expected, in view of the fact that He was going up to Jerusalem, that the reign of God was immediately to *appear* in glory. The long night of waiting was at an end. Soon the day of the Lord would break in splendour on the world, and all flesh should see it together.

Christ meets that excited expectation with one of His inimitable *stories*—a story of ten. Taking possibly a hint from Herod's palace that stood there in sight of all, He frames the well-known incidents of Herod's accession into a parable of His own work and the prospects of *His* kingdom.

A certain nobleman, He says, having to travel into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom, called to him ten of his servants and gave them ten pounds, that is, four pounds each, and *saying* to them, "*Trade ye till I come,*" departed on his long journey. He succeeds in the far country. The sovereign power confirms his claim to the crown he seeks. He comes back, "having received the kingdom," yet the kingdom does not *appear in glory*. The day of his return is clouded and dark in parts. Now, that the kingdom might appear in glory, what was

needed? Two things. That all the ten servants should have done their best in his absence, and that the citizens should have been loyal. Then all would have gone well.

But while some of the servants have done nobly—one increasing his pound to ten, another his to five—some have done badly. One, indeed, has made *nothing* of his trust during the whole time of his master's absence. He has not even tried.

The king is delighted with every one of his faithful servants, and rewards them so generously that the Court is amazed, and even ventures to half *remonstrate* with him: "Lord, he hath ten pounds." "Ah, well! let him have them." He serves a generous master, who delights to reward those that are faithful—*pressed* down.

And this was the king whom the citizens HATED! They sent an ambassage after him to the far country saying, "We will not have this man to reign over us." He still offers himself to them. He claims them with a right confirmed on high, but they remain stubborn, sullen, malicious, and the wages of *their* sin is *death*. So ends the story. The king is crowned indeed, but he is not, he cannot be, perfectly happy. In his household there are slothful servants, and in his nation disaffected citizens.

Such is the parable, and surely it is a transparent one. Every kingdom, every community, needs the guiding light of genius. Commerce must have its "captains and generals who plan its whole strategy,

determine its tactics, direct its commissariat, and incur the danger of great defeats, as well as earn, if they do not gain, the credit of great victories." No human enterprise can forego the help of genius. The Church also has need of great men, for though it is not of the world it is in the world, and as an organisation it is subject to the laws that govern earthly things. Let us be thankful that the Master still entrusts great gifts to some of His servants.

But the stability of a kingdom depends even more on the fidelity and industry of the common people than on the brilliance of its highly endowed leaders, and the glorious appearing of the reign of Christ is subject to the same condition. It is before everything a religion of the people. While the few who hold talents in their hands are important, the loyalty of the many who have only pounds—the dim, common population—is even more important. And the great object of the parable is to bring home to the people a sense of the tremendous power for good they possess, and their individual responsibility for this power.

The masses of men are practically equal in endowment and in opportunity. Genius is to the race what mountains are to the earth, so rare in comparison to the mass that they bulk less than the pimples on an orange.

Nature and Providence make but little difference compared to the difference which men make themselves.

Great in external appearance and internal appointment is the difference between *palace and cottage*. Yet, as a rule, it can be measured, for it is a material difference. The amount needed to obliterate it can be calculated to a penny.

But the difference between one cottage and another may easily be, and often is, immeasurable. One man, by folly and sin, makes his home a hell. The other, by the grace of God, makes it a place of help and happiness. A gulf *divides* rich and poor, but it is spanned by innumerable bridges thronged with men and women crossing from one to the other, some going one way, others another. But the gulf, self-created, between good and evil is the wide gulf, and can be bridged *only* by the grace of God.

Life holds out much the same prospect to the merry group of children whom you see at play on the village green. They belong to the company of the Ten. The master gives them pounds, not talents.

Yet if you could watch their history, you would be startled by the growing differences. Yonder *industrious* lad will turn his one into ten. That *plodding*, dogged youth will make five. That other will barely hold his own. Chances will come to him, but he will *bury* as though they were dead things and not living seeds, to be sown and multiplied.

Yes ; and alas there is the fool. "He goeth after

evil seed as an ox goeth to the slaughter, as a bird *hasteth* to the snare, and knoweth not that it is for his life."

Could those, at the close of their day, be brought to lie together in the little old churchyard close by the green where they played, within sound of the stream where they bathed, it would be seen that character had made havoc of the early equality. One has become a ruler of ten cities ; another of five. One has lost even that which he had—and alas ! saddest of all, some have even refused the King ! They have denied the rights of God.

All meet in the grave ? Oh no ! There is an order in death. A man inherits the cradle, but he buys his grave, and if he is to rest in *consecrated* ground, it is he alone can make it holy.

Well, the majority of CHRIST'S people also belong to the Ten. We have *pounds*, not talents. We have gifts, responsibilities, chances, that do not demand any great ability, only average prudence, economy, and faithfulness—about as much as the ordinary wage-earner who has no occasion for the financial genius of the millionaire, the rules of the savings bank afford all the information and counsel he needs. Yet it is he who makes a country rich and strong. "In the multitude of people," says the Book of Proverbs, "is the king's glory, but in the want of people is the destruction of the prince."

It is true that every community stands in need of personalities living exclusively for its ends,

but the glory of the king is in the multitude of *people*.

Now we for the most part belong to the people. We have neither time nor capacity for great things, and we are not asked for anything great; no great gift, no great sacrifice, is demanded of us. Christ gave you a little, a *very* little thing to do for Him. He appointed you for a service that interferes in no way with your work or leisure. He asked of you an example in the home, the quiet influence of a consistent life in your business and social circle, a little work, a little help, in your own church. Less no master could ask. Easier burdens could not be laid upon you. It is, indeed, with reason that He says to us, "My yoke is easy, My burden is light."

The deficits in the treasuries of churches and missionary societies are not due to the vastness of the expenditure, but to the lack of thoughtful and generous giving on the part of Christ's common people. We have become increasingly lavish in our expenditure on ourselves. We give more for furniture, for clothing, for food, for "week ends," as the hideous phrase is, and less in proportion to our giving power for philanthropic and religious work.

Some say that we need a great religious revival in order that we may be made strong for self-denying and sacrificial gifts. Well, we do need a revival. But the maintenance and propagation of Christ's

cause at home and abroad entail very little sacrifice on the majority, only ordinary consistency, consideration and fidelity.

If all who are called by Christ's name did the little thing He gave them to do, this difficulty would vanish in a month. We should rejoice in our task. The humiliating appeals for money would cease. No more would the names of men, with no other recommendation than their wealth, figure on the notices of our annual gatherings. Never again would the Church crave alms of the world, nor tolerate the patronage of the rich. She would be jealous of her privilege. She would trade with talents and pounds. She would not share her glad burden with any. Money would flow silently in, plentifully, wonderfully. Men would become aware of a great miracle. The reign of God would appear in glory.

But the *rebellion* of the citizens? Well, that is a deeper depth still, and in the story the rebels are killed. But that is not Christ's way. He hath no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He went, when He had spoken the parable, from Jericho to Jerusalem and there He encountered all, and more than all, the opposition and cruelty which He had foreshadowed in this parable.

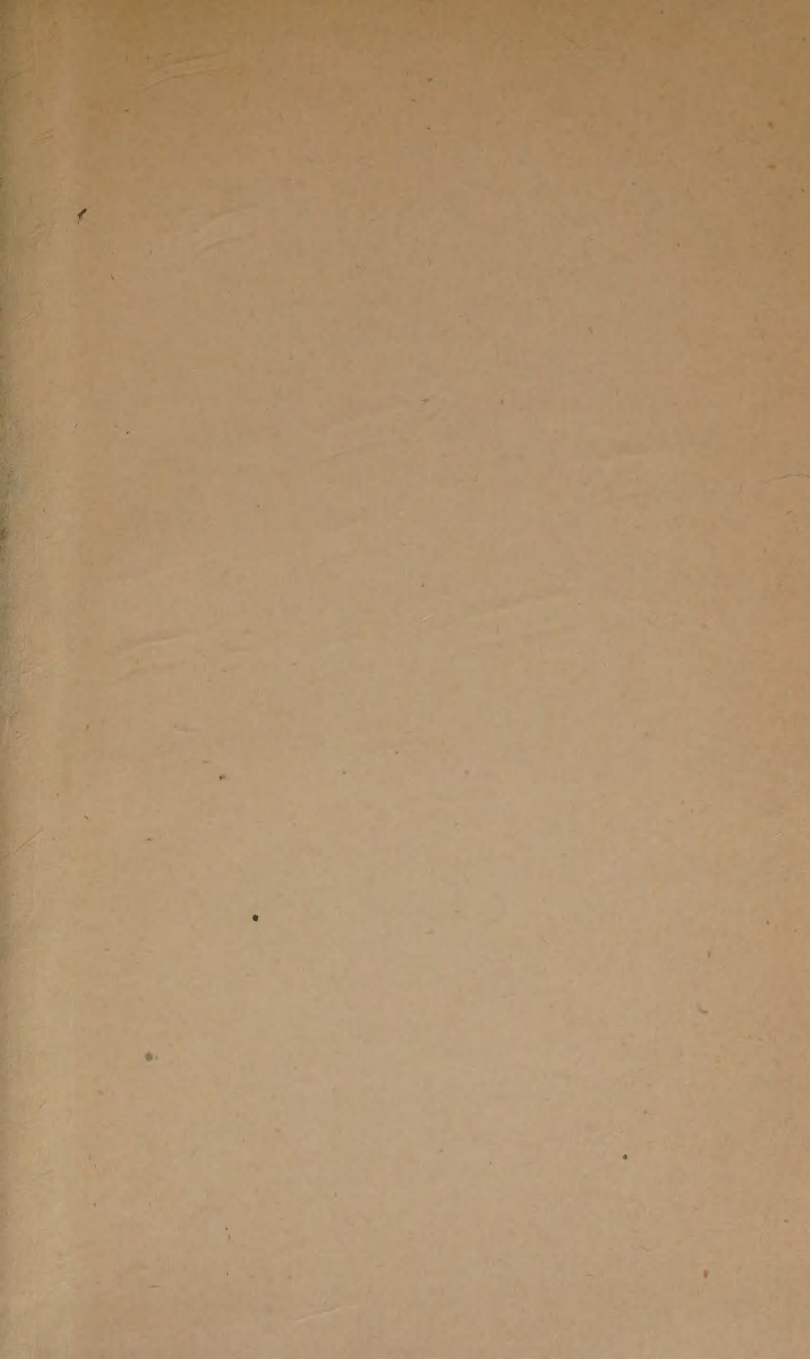
The ten forsook him and fled; the citizens rose in a mass against their king; but it was the king himself that died. Herod slew his enemies, but "While we were yet sinners Jesus died for us."

"So, through the thunder comes a human voice

'Thou hast no power nor mayst conceive of mine,
 But love I gave thee, with myself to love,
 And thou must love me, who hast died for thee.'"

May we feel the poignancy of that plea ! Have you rebelled ? Accept the pardon your King presses on you. Have you talents ? Pray for grace to use them. Have you only a small gift ? Then ask for great grace to trade therewith until He come !

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